Date: 1/20/02 - 2nd after Epiphany

Sermon: Behold the Lamb of God

Reference Text: Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Cor. 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

I'm sure you have all seen the little X+ian picture that says "When in doubt, follow the directions" and has a picture of a Bible. Everyone needs direction in life - but come on now, are we getting dumber or are the people who write directions for consumer products? For real!

On a bar of Dial soap. "Use like regular soap." (And that would be how?)

Printed on the bottom of Tesco's Tiramisu dessert "Do not turn upside down." (well... duh, a bit late)

On Nytol Sleep Aid: "Warning. May cause drowsiness." (and I'm taking this because ???)

On a package of peanuts: "Warning contains nuts." (talk about a news flash!)

~~Patrick J. Price~~

On a tag on a superman costume "Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly." (I don't blame the company. I blame the parents.)

And finally: On most brands of Xmas lights "for indoor or outdoor use only." (as opposed to – what?)

Everything comes with directions. I think even Jesus came w directions. Oh yes, the Bible of course. Certainly, he had his credentials as a rabbi, so of course he knew his Bible – but suppose there was something more – suppose he found in the Bible a real model for his life – say Isaiah's messianic Servant songs, although some of the modern scholars say that the story of Jesus was later modified so it followed the model of the servant songs. But suppose – just suppose – Jesus as a scholar read these psalms & realized there was a special message for him – a ~~message~~ model he needed to follow.

Hear again, the first one: Listen to me, O coastlands, + hearken, you people from afar. "God called me from the womb, from the body of my mother God named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of God's hand I was hidden; God made me a polished arrow + I was hidden in God's quiver. And God said to me: "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." and then God says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation (Yeshua) may reach to the ends of the earth."

Suppose - just suppose - you were a boy about the age Jesus was when his parents found him in the temple and you read this song and your name was literally in it. Now, the name Jesus in Hebrew is Yeshua + Yeshua means "my salvation" (= God's)

I wonder how personally the boy Jesus took that instruction. Suppose one day, you were reading your Bible and you read — as we do in carol themes: "To those who have been consecrated in Christ, who have been ~~dedicated~~ called to be God's dedicated people — there is no spiritual gift in which you lag behind, while you eagerly wait for the appearing of Christ who will keep you secure right to the end so that no one will be able to impeach you on the day of our Lord JC. You can rely on God — by whom you were called to share the fellowship of X."

The Bible is full of messages, but most of them fit everyone — but not many of us are called by name. I don't know why or how you were named. I was named for my two grandmothers Marjorie Post & Louisa Flint. And I have tried to live up to the teachings

of Lavisa who was a real character, but an awesome person to follow after. But suppose you had a name that had some meat to it - like "God's Salvation" and you were a little Jewish boy in rabbinic school - yeshiva - and your name kept coming up over & over. Wouldn't it make you think that maybe god had named your name and you did have a special work to do.

It comes as no surprise to me then that one day Jesus' cousin John[3] - who probably attended the same yeshiva - after all, his father was a priest - sees his cousin coming down the street and he knows his cousin & how seriously he takes the Scripture & the model of the servant songs - and he says - "See the Lamb of God who is taking away the sins of the world. See God's salvation in

the flesh. I came first to warn you but he is coming after me - but he is way ahead of me because he was greater than I was. I didn't even know how important he was. But I came baptizing in water to prepare you for him."

The servant songs, the name God's salvation, the idea of being the Lamb of God - all these were powerful symbols in the ancient world.

Now, you & I may not be turned on by the image of Jesus as a lamb. Lambs do not have a powerful image in our society. Evangelist John Hazel tells a story going back to the depression. His family did not have much money & John's mom was handicapped ~~which~~ & her kleds made money even tighter. John was a teen and needed a jacket & his dad took him to a men's store in Philadelphia

There, for only a few dollars was a gorgeous white jacket that would keep him warm. There was just one problem - over the chest was an embroidered animal and around it the title "Partelli's Lambs." The last thing a teen - even in depression days - would want his buddies to see was a sheep on his chest. The clothing dealer put his fears to rest when he told him, "Don't worry, son, this is the jacket of one of the rowdiest bowling clubs in our area. There's nothing sissy about these guys!"

Behold the Lamb of God - who takes away the sins of the world. Yeshua God's salvation.

What was John thinking. Maybe of the passover lamb. The next chapter will tell us that passover was near. Maybe John saw the passover lambs being herded from the

highlands down to the temple to be sold for passover. Maybe John was thinking of the passover lamb whose blood protected the homes of the Israelites when the angel of death slew the first-born of the Egyptians. Maybe he was thinking "there's your sacrifice who can deliver you from death."

Maybe John was thinking of his father, the priest, offering a lamb on the alter for the salvation of the people + thinking of his cousin Jesus' name "God's salvation", and thinking every night a lamb is slain in the temple for your salvation but this one, Jesus, is truly your salvation."

There are two great pictures of lambs in the prophecies. One is the gentle lamb — but there's another we rarely see.

In a book between the old + NT there is a book called Maccabees. It tells of the struggles between the Jewish people + the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanies. In those days, the lamb + especially the great horned lamb was the symbol of the conqueror. It was the symbol of the Maccabees - also of David + Solomon. Jesus was a descendant of David. This lamb - strange this it may sound to us - stood for the conquering champion of God. It may well be that the symbol John had in mind was not of meekness, but of power + majesty. Jesus - God's salvation - was to be the champion of God who fought for our souls and mastered the Evil One in a single contest.

Lamb of God - Pre-Existant Word of God - the Very Human One - The model human being - The child of God. All these powerful pictures were in John's mind that day

and Jesus may have had in his the picture of himself as the servant songs portray him.

What's in yours. Are you "called to be God's dedicated people — consecrated in X - enriched in every form of knowledge because what ~~X~~ we promised ~~Paul~~ X could do for the people has been proven to be true in you. You have all the Spiritual gifts you need while you eagerly await X's coming — secure right to the end so that no one can impeach you in the Day of our Lord J C.

Jesus believed it. John believed it. Christians through the centuries have believed it. We need to too. An old ~~missionary~~ missionary ~~saying~~ said says "If you will accept X, you will find wonder upon wonder and every one is true." I believe that. ~~[redacted]~~. Just follow the directions. Amen

Date: 2-3-02

Sermon: What DOES God require Of Thee?

Reference Text: Micah 6:1-18 - 1 Cor. 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

As most of you know, we have a dog. We hadn't had a dog for many years, but now we have a years old poodle. He is a character, but he listens and he communicates. He has a funny way of saying "yes" - he turns circles. He can't speak - but he can communicate But he has made us very aware of how animals communicate, how they listen - he understands about 10 words - and how they behave.

There's a story about a major league game that was stopped by a dog. A dog walked on to the field at a Kansas City Chiefs game - and just wandered around. The game was stopped so the dog could be removed. The umpire tried to shoo him off. The players yelled at him "Get out, go home, you idiot dog." The dog by this time

was thoroughly confused, ran here and there and finally lay down on third base refusing to move. A sports reporter summed up the situation, "The problem was, the dog could hear no dominant voice."

Sometimes religion is like that. Most of us grew up in religious homes - we were told our early beliefs by our parents. Then we went to SS & church and were told what the SS teacher believed and what the preacher believed. Maybe we're addicted to TV evangelists who tell us what they believe. We listen to X+ian music and pick up more of what they believe and we have all this stuff running around in our heads - our experience tells us something entirely different and we wind up not knowing what we believe. we don't hear a dominant voice

I grew up a Methodist and went to a Methodist seminary and learned something valuable - your faith is really based on four things - most people's anyway - 1. Scripture 2. your church's traditions, 3. Science & human knowledge + 4. Your own experience. A truly mature faith grows out of those four things. Certainly, the Bible has great import - but if the Bible contradicts any of the other three we tend to adjust the Biblical to the modern world + what both our understanding of science + our own experience tells us. The same c church tradition. When tradition ceases to be meaningful, we make adjustments. Likewise when science + what we believe come into conflict - we sometimes have to choose one or the other, and when our experience tells us something strongly + all

the others are conflicted - we know something is wrong, & our belief system changes.

Micah was there. The religious system of the day was the old sacrificial system. If I sin I sacrifice two doves, pigeons, a lamb, a ram, a bull - depending upon the supposed size of my sin. It had gotten to the point where the priests were sacrificing huge numbers of animals and Micah was thinking about Israel & Judah being so far from God that it would take thousands of animals to pay for their sins. And maybe - like their neighbors who worshipped Moloch, they would sacrifice their own children - and he began to see that no matter how extreme the sacrificial system got - it wasn't what God required - what God did require could be summed up in three ideas

To live justly, to love mercy & to walk humbly ⊂ God. Justice was an important consideration for the OT prophets. They coved see all around them injustice. The poor being sold into slavery for their debts, the country people's land being taken away from them. Poor shopkeepers loosing every thing they had - by people who were very religious - who certainly could afford the sacrificial system. It was neither just nor merciful - and it was ⊂ proudness, they painted out how much they supported the system & which knew that did not please God.

We know people like That. They're in church every Sunday, they tithe every nickel, they look down their haughty noses at the poor & the oppressed and thank God they are not like other people - and then they rip off their employees's

pension plans, put their friends into political office, pat themselves on their backs & tell you what good Christians they are. God does not want that kind of Christianity. Jesus did not teach that kind of Christianity.

Matthew's gospel sums up Jesus' teachings in a long passage we have come to call "The Sermon on the Mount." Actually when you look at the original language - it wasn't what Jesus taught one particular time but what Jesus customarily taught all the time

Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the K of Hvn.

Actually what he was saying in each of these pronouncements is more like "Oh the joy/O the bliss" The word is Makarioo & it is like happiness to the greatest

extent. "Oh the bliss of the person who realizes their own utter helplessness + who has put their whole trust in God for only then can you render the kind of perfect obedience that will make you a citizen of the K of Hon."

~~Blessed~~ O the bliss of the mourner, for God will comfort them. O the bliss of the ones whose heart is broken for the world's suffering + for their own shortcomings for out of their sorrow, they will ~~see~~ find the joy of God.

~~O the bliss of those who are always angry at the~~

Jesus was tying together some very profound Hebrew + Greek ideas in these teachings.
Meekness - in blessed are the meek - is the word praus
The Greeks took it to mean the person who was angry at the

appropriate time and never angry at the wrong time – who had every instinct, impulse & passion under God's control – who had the humility to recognize his own ignorance & his own weakness for that person will be a ruler among people.

Jesus is not asking us to be doormats – rather – he is asking us to know what ~~it~~ to be angry about and do something about the injustices of the world, for those are truly the peacemakers.

I could go on Beatitude by Beatitude ~~and~~ but I had rather take a classroom not a worship service.

The Beatitudes were written for the poor who followed Jesus – with Micah's injunctions in mind and with the needs of ordinary people taken into

consideration. Francis of Assissi said something to his followers which I have often believed & followed as ~~so~~ a pastor - especially in early days of my ministry — If you truly follow Jesus "You will be poor, you will be constantly in trouble, & you will be absurdly happy." I believe he learned his whole faith from the Sermon on the Mt - which teaches those things.

Paul conveys the idea in his letter to the Corinthians — You are not wise by human standards, not mighty as well-born, You are the people called to stand the world on it's head — to turn it upside down. The foolish called to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong. You do it entirely thru JC who is our wisdom & righteousness. The Jews are looking

for signs & the Greeks for wisdom
but we preach X crucified —
a stumbling block to the Jews
& foolishness to the Greeks, but
to those called — both Jew & Greek —
X is the power of God, the wisdom of God —
for God's foolishness is wiser than
human wisdom
~~than~~ & weakness in God is
stronger than human strength.

You cannot do better than to
follow Micah's — do justice,
love mercy & walk humbly w
your God. You cannot do better
than follow the Beatitudes &
like Francis you may be poor,
constantly in trouble, but ...
absurdly happy.

Amen.

Exodus 17: 1-7, Roman 5: 1-11
John 4: 5-42

Since Woodlawn + Eastlake are part of "in the hood" and we are so close to our neighbors, I wonder what they think this motley crew comes together for + especially what they think when we start singing hymns? In a way it reminds me of a Boston story. A fellow claimed he lived in a very religious neighborhood. One time he asked the local priest "Is it true that in this neighborhood, if you carry a cross, you never have to worry?" And the priest replied, "Yes, but it all depends on how fast you carry it!"

The children of Israel were out in the wilderness and they were thirsty + they were afraid they were going to die. And they murmured against Moses.

how I understand people murmuring against their leaders. I once was called to a church + when I got there, I was considered "too liberal," which was funny because I had just left a church where I was considered "too conservative." And the men of the church decided they were going to get rid of me. So they would have these little clandestine meetings sitting in their cars in the parking lot. Eventually, of course, they got rid of me. That was the first time I decided that if I was going to have a church who could accept a conservative Xtian who was a political liberal I'd have to found it myself.

Anyway, they were grumbling about the water situation. ~~etc~~ In many parts of the Middle East and North Africa water is a

precious commodity. Now, in a place where we have floods, we have a hard time conceiving of real thirst, but even in some parts of America — especially where we sent our Native Americans, water is a precious commodity. We spend a buck & can buy almost any of the best water in the world. Yet they have done tests & in one of them N.Y.C. tap water won out over the finest bottled watr. It's all a matter of taste & how gullible they think Americans are. For years we were told you need to drink 8 glasses of water a day. Now we're being told it's really more like 4 because you take in fluids in foods, soft drinks, milk, fruit & vegetables, etc. You know what Evian (probably one of the most popular waters spells backward — "Naive." We're buy anything that's advertised — good bad or indifferent if they tell us "it's the best."

But water ~~of~~ is a gift of God.

Before Michigan's water problems

and not everyone has good drinking water. Moses' people didn't & they thought Moses had brought them out in the desert to let them die. And Moses said, "look, I don't supply the water God does. There's no point in getting angry @ me." And so he called on God to solve his problem

Have you ever been wandering in the wilderness, hungry & thirsty? I'm not talking literally now, but figuratively. You are emotionally in a dry, brown space - an emotional desert - if you will. For most of us when we get to those places, we try to feed our hungers & thirsts with many things. Emotionally stressed out we try alcohol, drugs, sex. We're looking for love in all the wrong places and wondering why we get hurt, why our lives are a mess & where the devil is God in all this. Been there?

the journey is not always through green pastures. During the journey between promise & fulfillment, understanding God's will & obeying God's guidance are challenging at best & terrifying at worst.

When you are afraid, hungering & thirsting for love, caught in a spiritual desert & sand whirling all around you, trusting God's providence is hardly on your mind.

So it was for the Israelites during the many years of travel. Where was this promised land? 40 years is a long time to be in a desert! Please don't take 40 literally. I think I've told you this 40 was an expression that meant "long enough" — long enough for whatever God was trying to get across. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert — long enough for him to make up his mind that he really wanted to be the savior of the world.

It rained 40 days & 40 nights - long enough to wash away the sinful world. ~~40 do~~ 40 years in the wilderness - long enough for the doubters & those who wanted to go back to the ease of Egypt to die off. 40 - long enough. If you are 40 years old & you have just got to change your life - that's long enough.

Trust. Moses was asking them to trust him, trust God. And so God shows him where a hidden spring is located & they have water. We doubt God's provision for us. It's hard to wait. Americans don't wait easily. Apparently neither did Israelites. I always tell people the Bible is relevant because situations & nationalities may change, but people are pretty much the same. We're not so different from the Israelites. We want our water & we want it now! We hate living in the in-between times. College isn't all fun & games

It's a lot of hard work, but it's the difference between the hood + the profession — or ~~the~~ since this is Alabama, the trailer + the profession.

Water. Here comes a woman to a well. Not your ordinary American well fed by a spring but a hole deep in the ground where a flat piece of leather was laid down in the hole and pulled up & maybe a couple of cupfuls of water that in turn could be poured into a jug until it was filled. Lonely, tedious work to get your daily needs met. No one around? Why? She was an outcast. The village bad woman. Bad reputation — five husbands + living & a man. The funny thing was if she had been a Roman at that time nobody would have even noticed her lifestyle. But she was a Samaritan — and everybody knew what Samaritans were like.

Half-breeds, Jewish and something else. Midway between Judah & Galilee was Samaria. You either had to go through it or around it. Many observant Jews avoided it. Some, like Jesus, felt it was worth going through.

Rabbi talks to woman in public? Scandal. I don't know if you remember the time the pastor of the ~~First~~ Dawson Bapt Church was caught in Woodlawn in the parking lot of the Capt D's where the hookers hang out at night - but he never was able to explain what he was doing there - ~~but that's~~ and lost his big plum church.

But that's what the Jews of the day would have thought of Jesus talking at the well to this particular Samaritan woman. The other women didn't want her around. Men used her & threw her away. And here she was in the hottest part of

the day trying to get water by the cupfuls.

She was thirsty, too. She was thirsty for acceptance. We are too. I don't know about you, but I'm sick of not being accepted. I'm sick of Judge Moore's view of us. I'm sick of us being thought unfit parents. Most of us are loving, caring people who could provide a ~~b~~ lot better home for a child than an institution, many foster homes, or an abusive home. The good judge seems to think homosexuality is worse than abuse. 10 years from now, when the abused are abusers & the children of gay parents are loving parents will he feel the same? Everybody wants to feel accepted without fear of criticism + rebuke for who we are. Jesus accepts the woman right where she is. He's not shocked - not prurient about her behavior - He talks to her. the living God - the Messiah - is

having a conversation & an outcast able. And she discovers some truths about herself. She is acceptable, she is lovable, she is redeemable. And we all are.

But she discovers some thing else - some truths about God. There is no thing that can prevent God from loving & caring about people. It's a thirst we are born to be loved & accepted, probably more by God than by people.

Jesus promises her living water & the bread of life. Far too often we try to live in the deserts of our lives & turning to the bread of life & the cup of salvation.

But you know what they bring you. Paul tells us they bring peace. I hate Judge Moore's god. I was raised & that God & I never trusted it. But a loving God. That's another story. I don't

have to fight a loving God, or run away from a loving God, or fear a loving God. I can be in a loving relationship with God <u>because</u> of X. Will I really be accepted by God? Yes. Because God sees you through the veil of X.

Is your situation hopeless? No. Please hear this. When we became Xians we were <u>NOT</u> promised our problems would go away. We were promised some tools to help us deal w them. In suffering, we would find the power to endure, the power not to give up on God or our faith. That would deepen our character & show us that we really could trust God. It would enable us to go on, no matter what we were facing. And it wasn't pie in the sky, later on by & by — but tools to live in this life Now. It was <u>real</u> Hope.

Living in X has never been easy. As I say to people, look at what they did to the founder!

the early X+ians were martyred + many are today. A lot of our community don't want to live in X. It means giving up the parties + the sex + the fun. That's not what it's all about. The Dog is a party. A different kind of party - a celebration of victory - a constant singing of "We Shall Overcome" a reward for having achieved justice, for meeting needs, for abolishing want - It's water on a desert land + deep unspeakable joy.

It starts with knowing that God loves you. It grows with throwing your helplessness + hopelessness on X and following his lead. You don't have to go on looking for love in all the wrong places. You ARE loved. You don't deserve it — but you know what? You have it anyway! Please know that God hates you where you are - but loves you too much to leave you there.

You matter to God. God will not leave you thirsting in the wilderness, or alone + isolated trying to find a cup of cold water. God loves you and wants you to live a full + rewarding life — God will give you the tools to do that — and will strengthen you on the way. Just as God provided water in the wilderness + Jesus gave living water to the woman at the well, God sustains us by the cup of salvation + the bread of life. Fed + sustained, we will find rest for our souls. God promised. Amen.

Choose Life

We're moving in toward the end of Lent. Palm Sunday, Holy week + Easter are coming. The smell of death was already around Jesus. He was in trouble. The foreshadowings were there.

Death scares us & well it should, but it shouldn't. I know that's a strange sentence. I live c a hospice SW. We live death every day.

Let me tell you a hospital story. There was an unusual situation in a hospital — and the funny part is it could happen in any hospital. Every Friday morning in the same bed in the ICU a pt. would die regardless of the patient's Medical Condition. Now this puzzled the medical staff. Some even believed it had something to do c the supernatural. The doctors decided to go to the ICU where this kept happening on the

next Friday morning & watch to see what was going on. Fri morning came & the docs & nurses were in the room watching. Nothing happened. Every thing was normal. The respirator was going — making it's whoosh & click, the TPR were being recorded. The IV fluids were running — every thing was under control. The cleaning crew came in to do their ~~monthly~~ weekly cleanup of the room. Then the staff figured out the problem. One of the cleaning crew unplugged the life support system so he could plug in the floor waxer.

The scary thing about this story is that it has a ring of truth about it. The floor waxer gets paid minimum wage, knows nothing about medicine or the machines around him &

maybe doesn't even speak the language. All we know is, he comes cheap. And unwittingly he does damage.

Life & death. Who pulled the plug? God?

We have a love/hate relationship w death as x-tians. On the one hand we regard it as the great enemy. "the grim reaper" - that awful specter that hangs over our lives. In medicine, we never say, "the pt died." they expire! In the military, you don't die - you "check out." Kids have a hard time believing death is permanent. The lead character on the favorite TV show dies & comes back in a totally different series. their favorite computer game ends w carnage all around. You push a button or hit a key and there they are - alive &

well ready for you to mow them down (another euphemism) all over again.

Meanwhile we're preaching funeral sermons telling people that death is the Xtian's greatest friend. We say "She's gone home to be c Jesus." What's so bad about that? Or "He's gone to his eternal rest." No pain, no tears - eternal bliss.

Two weeks from now it will be Easter Sunday and the church will be filled c happy faces singing "He lives, He lives" & the preacher's text will be something like "O Grave where is Thy victory?" "O death, where is Thy sting!" So which is it? Should we look forward to death or cling stubbornly to life. The answer is "yes!" Both/and.

In Ezekiel, God says "O my people,

I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them. ... Then you, my people, will know that I am God. I will put my Spirit in you & you will live and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I have spoken & I have done it, says God."

I thought as I read that passage - two groups of people are still fighting over who is going to be settled in their own land - when both claim the same small piece of real estate. But a promise is a promise — even if it hasn't been keepable for 3000 years.

The Bible IS current events.

Ezekiel - the people at that time had no doctrine of life after death. Death was the ultimate enemy. No ICU, no antibiotics, no insecticides or bacterial dish detergent. Death

come easily + early. The reward, they thought, for a righteous life was a long life. So it was good news that one day the graves would be opened + the Spirit of God would breathe life into those who were dead. Their nation had been crushed, thousands had perished, thousands more carried off into captivity + God is offering HOPE - in capital letters. To a people resigned to spiritual + political death - God tells them new life is coming. God is saying to Israel - you may have abandoned me - but I have not abandoned you.

Consider the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus holds a special place in the gospel of John. The story is in no other gospel - and that's surprising. Jesus raises others from the dead. The centurion's boy. Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's

son. Not much is made of them. But Lazarus - he's different. Fuel off, from all we know, he's a government official. He's a fairly rich man - after all, he's made a home for his two unmarried adult sisters. He loves Jesus like a brother. Raymond Brown says that he is the "disciple whom Jesus loved." He's a powerful figure & a popular figure. People have walked the two miles from Jerusalem to Bethany to be his mourners. there's a big crowd around. there are probably paid mourners wailing & pipers droning.

Mary & Martha are crushed. He - Jesus - has raised others from the dead and he didn't even come to be bedside. "Where were you when my brother died?" For two unmarried women living on his estate & dependent on him that's a pretty good

question. What happens to us now. We've never heard if Lazarus has a wife & children. Who will inherit? By Jewish law - the sisters cannot. "What took you so long? What's going to happen to us. And we thought you loved him. Where have you been?"

Jesus has bigger plans than just their welfare or Lazarus' health in mind. Not only would he restore Lazarus to them, but X would show them that they need not fear death any longer. He-X- was the Lord of life - and death.

Very early in Deuteronomy there is a bible verse I love "It when the children of Israel are about to enter the promised land. they are invited to choose to go or not. The verse is "I hold out to you this day life & death, choose life."

The testimony of scripture

is always that we should choose life - love life. Life is God's creation, God's gracious gift to us. It's why we have so much difficulty w the ethical questions of the day - like abortion, assisted suicide, + capital punishment. Life is precious + you don't just throw it away. But should a rape victim or a teenage child herself, or a person w too many children already, have an abortion - that's a dreadful question - but one only the person herself with God's help can answer. It may be the only answer. What about the terminally ill? Should they be given the means to end their lives if they are terminally + painfully ill. We all have our beliefs on the subject. What about Andrea Yates? Prison for life or death? The ~~Palestinians~~ Al Qaeda - prison or death? What is justice. Is it sometimes more just + merciful to allow death.

Is it sometimes more merciful to keep alive, Good people - Christians & non Christians - stand on both sides on these issues of life & death. "Choose life" - and sometimes to celebrate life - we may decide on the side of death. Yes/and.

Jesus said "He had come that we might have life & have it more abundantly.

Mary & Martha thought Jesus had abandoned them as Lazarus lay in the tomb. But Jesus never fails us. Jesus never abandons us. Jesus is our best friend & will always be there. There is great power in our faith, the same Jesus who called Lazarus from the grave calls us from our graves as well. Maybe not literal graves - but graves like closets, despair, degradation - all the places we hide from life. Embrace life - choose life. This

is God's will for you. Just as the whole Valley of dry bones came to life. Just as Lazarus came to life - You too - can come to life. You can, if you choose life! Amen

LIFE Junk Pile or Junk Dept?

While it was yet Dark

Acts 10:34-43, Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

My friend, Ben Padgett, who is pastor of Midfield UMC e-mailed me a funny I thought I'd share just to make you smile this Easter morning.

The Energizer bunny was arrested - charged ∈ battery!
A pessimists blood type is always B-negative!
Does the name Pavlov ring a bell?
I find my masseuse - she rubbed me the wrong way!
Practice safe eating — always use condiments!
A successful diet is a triumph of mind over platter.
If electricity comes from electrons, does morality come from morons.[2]

There were more — some

not shareable in church, but good clean fun.

I like Ben + his wife Carol. They are straight folk who want gay people to be themselves, who are willing to share God ō us without the usual guilt trip + who love us for who we are.

Easter morning - we all know the story. Maybe we know it too well and there may not be a new thought to add to it — but maybe just sharing some thoughts that came my way while reading for this sermon might help someone.

Have you ever thought about the fact that it was "while it was still dark" that this whole story took place.

Biblical

darkness is a powerful metaphor for the forces that wound & threaten to destroy. Searching for Jesus in the darkness as Mary did is exactly what many people are doing here + in our community today.

The fact that God had already accomplished the work of the resurrection - while it was still dark - means that Mary found the savior before the light came. New life began in the darkness & it still does - even when the darkness may be the shadow of death. Whether we are able to see or not Jesus sees us & reaches out to us in our darkness.

Go back in your mind's eye. It is dark - Orois is the Greek. the last watch before dawn,

somewhere between 4:30 and 6 a.m. Mary of Magdala — who was she? We know only that she may have been the woman cured of a demon + she may or may not have been an important courtesan — not an ordinary woman of the night — but now she's a different kind of woman of the night. Bishop Spong — on the basis of this scripture — insists she may have been Jesus' wife. She is doing the duty + asking the questions of next of kin — and she was not a blood relative. I had always thought it was because the three Marys were so close — Mary the sister of Martha, Mary of Magdala + Mary, the mother of Jesus — and because Jesus' mother was older + grieving, this Mary the strongest of the three women closest to Jesus came out to act for all of them. I don't

think men always understand the depth of women's friendship. Sometimes your best friend can be closer even than your lover - you'll tell her things you wouldn't share w a lover -

Anyway - she is there. She cannot see well or far ahead. There were no street lights. She knew the paths well even in the dark.

Mary and all those who loved Jesus were struggling to make their way through the dark est time they had ever experienced. Those who had managed to stay w Jesus all the way had witnessed his gruesome murder. The beaten, bloody body finally hung from a crosspiece - and they had been helpless to do anything but receive a few last words from him.

Those who had not been able

to stand by Jesus grieved doubly. because now they could not talk to him & make things right. There would always be this unfinished business between them and they regretted it bitterly. Peter - for one, wished he'd kept his mouth shut & not made those grand promises to stand by Jesus no matter what.

As if there were not enough reasons for sorrow, Mary found evidence that the tomb had been tampered with. A sacred place had been desecrated. Now there was not even the comfort of a grave site. "We don't know where Jesus is!"

Do you ever wonder where Jesus is?

Many of us know what it's like to feel the Lord's absence acutely - when our need is greatest, often that's when we cannot see him.

If God is good, why does life have to be like this.

There are times when the emotional darkness is as deep as the dead of night. Sometimes it's just a grey gloom overshadowing us, veiling our sight + we wonder how we are going to go on.

Angels - but not even the sight of angels could clear away Mary's tears. There in the darkness was Jesus. but she did not recognize him. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him + I will take him away." She just had to find Jesus.

But then the living Lord found her! "Mary!" He called her by name. He knew her in the darkness. His voice touched her troubled heart and she recognized him. Jesus was near + he was alive. Jesus had found her in the gloom.

Think of what this means. It means that <u>while it was still dark</u>, the stone was moved. While it was still dark, God raised JC to new life. Before daybreak, God was already at work to overcome the horror of Friday. Death seemed to have brought down the curtain of darkness forever, death was gloating over a victory - but God wasn't finished yet! God forbade death to have the last word.

People, Christ arose while it was still dark. He was alive before dawn, before those who were able to see + believe. Although Mary felt lost + alone, Jesus wasn't far away. Jesus was already alive, already reaching out to her again - while it was still dark. Hope was alive, dreams were alive. The future was alive - there were still possibilities - life was apparent.

Jesus was alive!

Surely, Jesus can find us in our darkness and call us by name. Surely, Jesus can overside our despair. And because the living Christ is ℰ us, new life is possible. Healing, freedom, forgiveness, new directions are all possible for us. The future is alive.

In a Dennis the Menace cartoon - Dennis' wrong doing - for which he is being punished is abundantly clear. "The handwriting is on the wall." With the evidence of his misdeeds an open box of Crayolas, crayons scattered on the floor behind him, Dennis sits in a corner staring at the once pristine walls now decorated ℰ his art work - a dinosaur, a house, a cowboy, the sky ℰ sun + clouds. Evidently his mom didn't much appreciate his artwork, & he sits cuddling his teddy bear, alone ℰ his

thoughts. Hank Ketcham allows us to overhear what he is thinking - "Boy, I wish life came c an eraser!"

Don't we all? I suspect there are times in all our lives when we, too, wish life came c an eraser, when we would relish the opportunity to turn the clock back to a time before our latest mistake, so we would have one more chance to make a better choice. Oh, if life could only offer us an eraser capable of giving us a new & fresh start, free of our past errors, an eraser that could turn back the clock to a time before our mistakes had left us shaking our heads & wondering "How could I have done that?" "What's a ~~~

of Easter is that there is such an eraser. In our darkness, we have been raised ⁊ christ.

Colossians says, "If you have been raised ⁊ X, set your heart on the things ⁊ are above... Have a mind where all of those thoughts are filled ⁊ Things above, not on things of the earth. For you died + your life is hidden ⁊ Christ in God. Whenever X, your life shall appear - you too shall appear ⁊ him in glory.

The risen X who comes in your darkness is the eraser Life comes ⁊. Things can change. They did that Easter morning so long ago. God took out an enormous eraser and erased away the gloom of the crucifixion + death, revealing the dawn + the brilliant light of new possibilities, new freedoms, new ways of looking at things.

Your spiritual blood type can now be A positive instead of B negative

For whether we can see X in our darknesses, Jesus is alive! that's a promise. Jesus is c us in the shadows, no matter how deep or frightening they are. That is God's promise, Love is alive + is the Lord of heaven AND earth. That is a promise. Life does come c an eraser. That is a promise.

Even when your heart is crying "God where are you?" Jesus hears you + is making his way to you even now. It's hard to wait, but realize he is standing c you in your darkness + waiting to touch you c his voice.

Two promises this easter. The first: we are on the threshold of dawn. We can wait until daylight is here when we will

all walk by the light of the world Jesus. Second: life does come ~~c~~ an eraser. God does clear away the gloom + make it bright again. One day we will all walk in the sunlight - there will be no more darkness, no more night, and it will be Easter forever.

Amen.

Thomas, the Virtuous
Acts 2:14a, 22-23, 1 Peter 1:3-8
John 20:19-31

With apologies to Shirley – I love my dog. Well, our dog.

~~Someone~~ My friend, Rev. Bill Pellegrino shared this w me.

If you want someone who will do any thing to please you – Get a dog.

If you want someone who'll make a total fool of him/her self because he's/she's so glad to see you – Get a dog.

If you want someone who'll eat whatever you put in front of him + never say his mother made it better! Get a dog.

If you want someone who's eager to go out anytime you

want & anywhere you want.
Get a dog.

If you want someone who'll be content to just snuggle up & keep you warm in bed & who you can kick out of the snores—
Get a dog.

If you want someone who never criticizes anything you say, doesn't care how good or bad you look, acts as though every word you say is ~~important~~ worth hearing, never complains, & loves you unconditionally all the time, get a dog.

Do you wonder that DOG spelled backwards is God.

On the other hand
If you want someone who never comes when you call her, ignores you when you walk in a room, leaves hair all over the place,

walks all over you, prowls around all night & comes home only to eat & sleep all day, & acts as if you are there only to see that she's happy — Get a cat

Unconditional love! Thomas didn't understand unconditional love. I don't think I understood unconditional love for a long, long time. Trust doesn't come easily when your mom goes to a movie when you're 10 mos. old & never comes home, when a social worker comes to the house when you're 4 and takes you away from the foster family — who are the only family you've ever known & puts you in an old fashioned "Oliver" sort of orphanage, & when you wind up in your nuclear family at 7 & every one of them thinks you are there to be slapped around

And my dad was clergy!

and you walk out one day to go to the movies + never go back and spend 6 months as a street kid living in the subway + sleeping in movie houses because they're warm / cooled. Trust — did not come easily.* I share my own journey with you because how can you believe what I'm saying unless you know where I've been. Do I know that. Sometimes you can question where is God in all this? O yes. Do I know where Thomas was emotionally + intellectually when all the disciples said they had seen Jesus — and Thomas said "Unless I see him = my own eyes and put my hand in the wounds I will not believe."

I like Thomas. He had a kind of honesty that allows us to question also. If Thomas is in the bible - it must be

okay to question. Thomas had two great virtues. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. He did not still his doubts by pretending they did not exist. He was not the kind of person who could rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about. I believe there is more ~~that~~ ultimate faith in the person who insists on being sure than in the person who glibly repeats Christian truisms which he/she has never thought out and which they may truly not believe. From that kind of doubt comes certainty. With certainty comes peace. & peace comes joy.

A woman tells the story of going to a worship service where the entire congregation was told:

"If you don't have a smile on your face, you've got the wrong religion & shouldn't be here. Xtianity is a religion of joy."
She went away. She was in pain at that time & didn't feel that she could smile. She was having difficulties & was looking for comfort & was told she was not good enough for God because she was not smiling. Someone had confused the very surface phenomenon of smiling for an inner joy. We do not have a god who requires us to bob & curtsey & say "yes, boss," all the time when deep down we have questions like "where is God in all this."

The second person in our Scripture lesson this morning is Peter - the frightened. Our epistle lesson comes from the guy who was too scared to admit he was a follower of Jesus.

"It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, & the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews." John, of course, means the Jewish authorities. The doors were locked for fear. Most of us have been afraid. We grow up that way. "What if my mother finds out - or worse, my father." "What if my boss finds out & I lose my job?" "What if I'm so obvious no one will hire me?" We understand fear at a very basic human place. We've been there. But to feel hunted - like a Matt Shepherd or a Billy Jack Gaither - not that's fear.

We know what the disciples were afraid of. It was one thing to follow Jesus in his life when he was doing amazing things - but to follow him in death - to risk their lives, families, security, jobs & reputations - they were

Cruciere X + cans

↑

not going there. Or must have been pretty grim. This was no post-funeral meal where family + friends gathered to share stories, laughing + crying together. This was more of a living night-mare. They were locked up in fear, staring straight into the face of their own failure & sorrow, ashamed + afraid for their lives.

And then Jesus comes in. "Peace be unto you." I like that. "Jesus came + stood among them." There they were, scared + all locked up and Jesus came to them." He didn't come because they were down on their knees begging him to come — as many of us have been told we have to. He didn't come because they asked. He came because they needed him. He didn't come because they believed in him — ~~they~~ He came because he believed in them.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't unlock the door? He simply came in. How does God get in when we're all locked up & frightened. They funny thing about God is that's when God is most likely to get in. God/X is beyond our human limitations. God cannot be locked up or bound - not by time or space - certainly not by the boundaries of our hearts & minds - God - incarnate, in the flesh - passes through barriers & comes into our lives to bring us peace & joy.

Where are you locked up today? Are you a prisoner of a present of unfulfilled hopes & dreams because of something you failed to be or do in the past? Are you locked in to a Christianity that doesn't work for you because you believe there's only one way to praise, worship, & serve God & it's that way or no way? Are you a prisoner of revenge or resentment

because you cannot forget or forgive the wrongs done to you by others — or worse by yourself? Are you a prisoner of guilt or shame because of something you've done or failed to do.

Regardless of what has gotten us locked up — Jesus comes to us and says "peace." Shalom. Not just peace — but telling us all good things will come.

Scared Peter, doubting Thomas, scared + doubting us. But Jesus doesn't stop by speaking peace. He shows them his wounds, his scars. And it is only then that they are certain that the crucified One is the Risen One.

I think it's that way for us, too. We can't rejoice in the good news of the resurrection until we've tasted the sting of death.

I'm not sure I trust X'tians who've had it easy all the way who say "Of course, I have faith," until that faith is tested. I'm not sure we can really know the peace & joy of the X'tian life unless we're ready to see his wounds & ours. Healing doesn't begin until you look at your wounds — unbind them & let the air into them.

And then Jesus gives us work to do. "As my Parent has sent me - so send I you." We are meant to carry on the peacemaking & healing. You cannot just sit in a corner, patting yourself on the back because you're saved & everyone else is a sinner. You're saved because you are forgiven - now it's your turn to share that forgiveness w/ others. You've found joy & peace — so many are still hurting. We have a responsibility to be healers of the hurt for others.

we are unlocked to help others. unlocked unpressured relationships or set them free. Forgiveness gives us the opportunity to start all over again, especially when we feel that all is lost. Forgiveness lets us stop beating ourselves up for the past and lets us live again, love again, + serve again.

That's where the joy of the X+ian life come in. Not ~~Pollyanna~~ smiles that's easy. The Gospel + the Epistle have this in common. They were written for a scared + persecuted people. Peter years later doesn't focus on their trials + persecutions, he focuses on the future: Blessed be God who according to God's great mercy has caused us to be born to a living hope thru the resurrection of JC from the dead. — Though you have not seen him, you love him — tho' you do not see him NOW, you believe in him

and you greatly rejoice & joy inexpressible & full of glory obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your soul.

"Blessed are those who have seen, more blessed are those who have not seen & believe."

Tough stuff going on? Things are difficult? You don't feel like smiling, can't believe, & are all locked up. It's okay. But somewhere deep below the surface where nobody can see & you're not sure anyone can touch, Jesus is coming in through the locks & hurts & there is an inexpressible joy waiting to happen in you - the joy of X's resurrection & yours. It's there & it's promised to us because of X's resurrection. May you receive that joy today.

Amen.

7/5/02

Looking for Prince/Princess Perfect
Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67
Romans 7: 15-24a, Matt 11: 16-19, 25-30

Do you ever wonder why people do the things they do? People can be weird!
This was in the Knoxville paper:
A Dr. Tucker Montgomery spent 15 years as an E.R. physician at U. of Tenn Hospital in Knoxville. Dr. Montgomery had seen a multitude of injuries that resulted from sheer stupidity. There was a fellow who was brought into the E.R. with serious injuries to his face + teeth. The doctor was appalled to learn how the man had injured himself. While drinking, this man had been driving around his neighborhood lighting firecrackers from his cigarette + then throwing them out the window. He was having a high old time until he accidentally threw his cigarette out the window and stuck the firecracker in his mouth.

Why do you do some of the things you do? Why do I?

Not too recently I went into the hospital for what was supposed to be a three day stay. I would have my stomach repaired & be home over a weekend. Little did I know it would be a full two months before I could come home & three months before I would be back here talking to you. Why? Because I really believed that what my doctor said was true, but God had something more to say about it. I had something more to learn — and I am not sure that I have learned it all — but I know a lot more about humbleness than before I went to the hospital.

I don't know how many of you have heard the classic story behind ~~these pictures~~ ~~of~~ ~~classic~~ paintings in which a boy ~~puts~~ carries on the feathers of

an eagle & wax in order to fly. He flies into the sea & the sun melts the wax & he is tossed head first into the sea. ~~On~~ the painting shows only his legs protruding from the water. Hubris. We want to be like the Gods and have the understanding of God & we fail. It's really what Adam & Eve is all about — and since April, I have been more aware of what hubris is — inordinate pride. I think God taught me a long hard lesson about pride. I have been washed, dressed & fed by others — some of them men, many of them people I really didn't want help from & some of them who saw me as just a helpless old lady & who did little to be of help. Why did I have that first operation? Why did you eat that last piece of cake? Why don't we always look where we're going?

Why did I let someone get away with insulting me? Why did I put off finishing my sermon until Sunday morning? Why did so many people wait so long to sell their stocks? Why can't everyone be positive & cheerful all the time? Why do we let things get us down. Why did I do that? Why do we do that?

Paul was probably the second most influential person who has ever lived. While it is true that nearly a billion people on this earth follow Jesus, most of us do because of things Paul said. He helped define what the coming of X into the world really meant. He was a man of insight & intelligence. He was impassioned & inspired - disciplined & devout - sensitive & sincere. And yet for all that Paul could write "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do

the good I want, but the evil I do not want I do. He sounds exactly like one of us, doesn't he. His intentions were of the best; his actions did not measure up.

Look for a minute at our O.T. story. Abraham's servant is sent out to get a wife for his master's son, Isaac. There is a condition: She must voluntarily offer him water and water for his camel. Now, I don't mean to be difficult - but to fill up a camel might mean as much as 25 gallons of water. How would you like to stand out by the well & draw 25 gallons of water for a stranger's camel. The servant, probably the same Eliezar to whom Abraham had promised his inheritance if he had no child, could have decided that it was impossible to find a wife for Isaac under these circumstances & just quit the search. But God got involved. Rebekah, the girl,

draws water for Eliazer + for his camel, offers to put up the servant + his entourage + winds up marrying Isaac. Why did God arrange such a marriage?

Why do we think Prince or Princess perfect is going to be in a bar at 2:30 in the morning when we are apt to meet a more suitable mate at church? Who waned imagine the person of our dreams wandering around a bar in the middle of the night + who's going to think we're prince or princess perfect if we are wandering around a bar in the middle of the night.

Once when I was pastoring in Boston, two of the most unlikely men were members of my church. One was ~~fat~~ a oddly shaped overweight + 40, the other was cross-eyed + awkward, the kind of person who is out-of-touch with where his body parts

are. Usually when he came up for communion he would manage to reach for my arm & grab me somewhere else (sometimes embarrassingly somewhere else). Just as God found a mate for Isaac through Eliazar God put these two strange men together. They adored each other. We usually spoke of them as "the odd couple" - but I have always thought that if God could bring them together, God must have a plan for the rest of us.

Back to my stay in the hospital. Pride is a strange thing. When I was very young I was very proud of being an intellectual - what I really was was an intellectual snob. I could read in three languages, was familiar with dozens of cultures & histories periods, I was inordinately proud of what I could do intellectually. How did it feel

to find myself in a bed where I couldn't even turn over, was unable to write my own name, still have some trouble remembering words & can't now type more than 2-3 words without an error when I used to be able to type 90 words a minute without errors. Humbled, is about as close as I can get. Just a few weeks ago, I took my first steps after 57 days in bed. I took about 40 steps & the nurses applauded when I was able to walk from my room to the nurse's station.

A man once said that the "heart not the head is the home of the gospel." My daughter & I were talking about what was going through my head as I lay there barely conscious. It probably sounds ridiculous, but the hymns I learned as a child - particularly Fairest

Lord Jesus + Great is thy Faithfulness keeps going thru my head. We may be as wise as Solomon, have every degree in the book, but it is the simplicity, the trust + the innocence of a childlike heart that will enable us to go on when everything is against us. As I lay there unable to breathe, unable to speak, unable even to move, what kept going through my head were not the intellectual arguments for the existance of God, but the simple hymns of my childhood.

Back to Paul: Many years ago people did not wear hats, they wore hoods, usually of a color which signified their profession or trade. You could tell a person's occupation by the color of their hoods. The problem was that some people tried to pass themselves off as somebody they were not.

So they were a false hood — which is where we get the word "falsehood." Paul was a man who felt he was making a false hood. He was as was I + himself — He reminds me of many Christians I run into today. They are people who are so caught up in morality + what other people are doing that they forget that it is not morals that ~~make~~ save us, but a relationship — a relationship based on our love of X. Jesus never said "be moral + I will love you." As a matter of fact what he said was very nearly the opposite. It is not our morality, our intellect, our pride that keeps us followers of Jesus. It is something I learned as a child.

"Come unto me all you who are tired + heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you + learn of me, for I am gentle + lowly of heart + you will find rest for

your souls; for my yoke is easy & my burden is light.

It's good to be alive & able to tell you that.

Amen.

Gen 28:10-19a, Romans 8:12-25, 7/21/02
Matt 13:24-30, 36-43

Children of God

A sixth grade teacher posed the following problem to her class. "A wealthy man dies and leaves 10 million dollars. One fifth goes to his wife, one fifth is to go to his son, one fifth to his daughter, one sixth to his servant and the rest to charity. Now" said the teacher, "what does each one get?

After a very long silence in the classroom, one youngster raised his hand. With complete sincerity in his voice, he answered "a lawyer."

Paul was trained in Jewish law and probably trained as a rhetorician, the Roman equivalent of trial lawyer. He understands Roman custom well enough that when he writes, his illustrations would be perfectly understood by the Romans he is writing to.

For example, he uses the expression "sons + daughters of God." In English that's sort of sweet — we're the children of a loving God - we accept that and we sometimes behave as good children & sometimes as bad children, always & the knowledge that our parent would accept us back.

Romans had quite another picture and Paul uses that to make his point. Power of life + death

The Roman father had total power over his children. Jesus tells us we are ~~adopted~~ children who leave that father through adoption. We are adopted by another parent. Roman adoption had two steps. The first was ~~manumission~~ emancipation. It was carried out by a symbolic sale in which copper + scales were used. Three times the symbolism of

a sale were used. Twice the father symbolically sold his son & bought him back. The third time he did not, and then the power of the father was broken. The second part of the adoption process was the vindication. The adoptive parent went to the praetor, one of the roman magistrates and presented a legal case for the transference of the person into his parental power. When all of this was done, the adoption was complete.

- There were 4 main consequences of adoption
1. The person lost all rights in his old family & gained all rights as a legitimate child in the new family.
2. The child became heir to his parents property. Even if further sons were born into the family he shared the same

rights as the natural child.
3. In law, the old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out. All debts were cancelled. He was regarded as a new person entering into a new life in which the past ~~was~~ had completely disappeared.
4. In the eye of the law, he was absolutely the son or she was absolutely the daughter of the new parent.

Claudius adopted Nero in order that Nero might succeed to the throne. They were not in any sense blood relatives. Claudius had a daughter, Octavia. To cement the alliance, Nero wanted to marry Octavia. Nero + Octavia were in no sense blood relations, but before they could marry, the Roman senate had to pass special legislation.

When Paul says "children of God" this process is what Paul was thinking of. The adoption process was carried out in the presence of 7 witnesses. He says that the witness to our adoption is the HS.

Paul's picture is that once we were in the fatal power of our own evil ways & nature, but God in his mercy has bought us — by the blood of X — into God's absolute possession. The old life has no rights over us; God has the absolute right. The past is cancelled & the debts wiped out. We begin a new life in God and become heirs of all God's riches. We become joint-heirs w JC, God's natural child. Whatever X inherits, we inherit. But X had to suffer, and so we inherit that suffering also. If X was raised to glory, we too will be raised to glory.

It was Paul's picture that when ~~someone~~ we became ~~a~~ Xtians, we entered into the very family of God. We did nothing to deserve it; God, the great parent - Mother/Father of us all, in amazing love & mercy has taken the lost, helpless, poverty-stricken, debt-laden us and adopted us into the family & all debts are cancelled & glory inherited. That's what it means to be a child of God.

I want to compare that picture with Jacob's experience. Jacob is on the run. He has stolen his brother's inheritance & he is afraid of his mother. Esau is a big man & Jasph has been a wimp. And so he sets out on the run, to settle somewhere where Esau will not find him.

He settles down for the night. He rests his head on a huge stone and went to sleep. And he dreams the very famous dream of Jacob's ladder. He sees a ladder (actually in Hebrew, a ramp) stretching toward heaven & angels ascending & descending. And God speaks to him telling him that the one speaking is the God of his father & grandfather — to whom he had promised the land and had promised many descendants. He says something I am sure Jacob would remember all his life, "I am & you & will keep you wherever you go & will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done all that I have spoken to you."

So Jacob gets up in the morning, sets up the huge stone as a pillar and makes his morning prayer. He

calls the place Bethel and says "If God is w me and will keep me in the way ~~that I go,~~ and will give me bread to eat & clothes to wear, so that I come again to my father's house, then the Lord (El) shall be my God & this stone which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house & of all that you give me I will give a tenth.

Jacob adopts himself into God's family by accepting God. He has alienated his own family, he fears, by stealing his brother's inheritance, and is afraid. And God reassures him that all is well. And he praises God, by calling the place Bethel - Beth-House El-God,

The ladder or ramp he saw must have been a memory of the Ziggurats the stepped pyramids

that he heard tales of from his grandfather. Grandparents tell great stories. This one must have lived in his memory.

Paul's words leis in ours. Nearly two thousand years ago, Paul called us "Children of God" we call ourselves, to this day, Children of God.

We are children of God. This means we can walk in confidence. We do not have to fear any person or any situation. God told Jacob that, Paul told the early church that, we tell it to ourselves today. Yet, we all need a word of encouragement We need to know we are not hopeless - that our lives matter. There's an old hymn that says "I'm a child of the King, hallelujah." You are a prince or a princess in the K of God. We are children of the most High-

think about that the next time you pick up your Bible. The God of love has left words of love + advice especially for you. It is written for us, we are God's children.

We have a great inheritance. Jacob had a great inheritance. Descendants + lands. You have a greater inheritance. You have all God has to give.

Interesting story: A man named Tom Stonehill was speeding thru a small town one night. He was looking for a rest room. Finally, he came to a funeral parlor. Tom used the facilities and then paid his respects to the deceased. The funeral director, spotting Tom, insisted he sign the guest register. Tom thought it was a lot of trouble for just using the rest room, but he signed it.

A few weeks later, he got a call

from a lawyer in the small town. It turned out that Tom had visited the funeral home on the night that the town's richest citizen was laid to rest. He had no family as friends. In his will, this man had stipulated that whoever came to his funeral would receive his fortune. Tom was the only name in the guest register & he received the full inheritance.

You & I did nothing to inherit God's goodness. All we did was receive & enter our lives. Now every thing God has to give is ours.

Just as importantly, we have a great opportunity. We have our Bethel — our house of God. We invite people & sometimes they come & sometimes they don't. We think we're failures. No such thing. We are children of God. Let's put Bethel in

God's hands & if we are to grow we will. If not, we have remembered that God is our parent & we have worshipped this day & every day. We have a great inheritance. God has promised us increase & God has promised that we are children of God's. How much more can we want. It's like the song Wagean which ~~we~~ is sung at Passover. "It would have been enough."

Let us pray!

Whatever It Takes

Genesis 29:15-28, Romans 8:26+30
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

There is a South Pacific island called Pentecost. They have a practice which is very similar to our sport of bungee jumping - except they do it for religious reasons. On this island, the men practice land diving, an ancient ritual designed to please the gods and ensure a good yam harvest.

Each man builds his own diving platform. He & he alone is responsible for its construction. The diver also selects his own diving vines. He looks for exactly the right length to break his ~~fall~~ head-long plunge just as his hair brushes the ground. Too long a vine can mean a fatal crash landing; too short a vine and the gods will not be happy w/ his dive.

On the feast day, the diver ~~climbs~~ climbs the tower, which may be 68-85 feet high, ties on the vine which he has chosen, steps onto the platform & leaps. He may have second thoughts or cold feet. No shame is attached to the diver who changes his mind at the last minute, for whatever reason. Other divers will be there to ensure the year's harvest. The reluctant diver can try again next year.

The thing about the story that caught my interest was that each diver built his own platform & help and chose his own vine. ~~Each~~ Each diver was totally responsible for his own life or death.

I guess having recently come through a near death experience I was fascinated by the story.

I didn't get to choose my own death as if I was going to live — that was in someone else's hands.

I know that I have served at the funeral of people who have committed suicide — mainly people w severe, debilitating disease — who chose the moment at which they would die. So in a way, I believe that everyone has the right to make a final decision to die as they are fighting.

Paul must have been aware of that. He spent a lot of time in prison as imprisoned. He had a lot of time to think about life & death. But, he always thought about when he got out. His plans included a trip to Rome and the letter he wrote to the Romans was his introduction of himself & his belief.

What do you believe - what

do I?

There have been many occasions in my life that I have had to defend being a Christian. Once, when I was "Minister of outreach to women" in Boston - years before I was ordained - my job was to work in the feminist community & try to reach them for the church. The women would always question me as to how I could be a feminist & a Christian. They didn't need a male saviour or a male god.

It made me sit down & examine my beliefs. It also was why I was so adamant about inclusive language.

We had a ~~service~~ program once to introduce women to MCC. We would answer as many of their questions as we

Caved + ended up c a service. I didn't get to choose the music + wasn't at all surprised when half a dozen women walked out when the hymn was "Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee" - with the word "father love is reigning o'er us, brother love binds man to man." I hope you can see the gallows humor in that story. My son Jon once told me that one of the things he learned in his seminary was, "how can you win someone to X, if you have offended them?"

Life + death. Paul starts out by saying "I am convinced That the sufferings of this present age cannot be compared c the glory which is destined to be disclosed to us. — and we patiently await to see it. We hope for it.

How do you explain hope to someone who sees no need

What do you tell someone ~~that~~ who believes that this world is all there is & there is no hope for glory. All you can do - at the moment - is feel sorry for them.

But Paul wasn't speaking to a world peopled by feminists, he was talking to Jews in the dispersion & inquiring Romans. They would recognise that he was telling them how it was going to be on that day when God entered the world to divide the time that is from the time that is to come. When the world would be entirely different & he thinks of a world, including all of nature, yearning for that day.

And while we wait, we pray. Paul tells us that we are human, we don't know what we ought to pray for. A famous pastor C.H. Dodd once

said that "prayer is the divine in us appealing to the Divine above us."

How much have you thought about prayer? I hate to pray openly - I do it because it is what I consider pastoring is all about. But my personal preference is to keep prayer personal. What I pray for is between me + God. As a pastor, I know that we need to pray collectively because the "prayers of the faithful availeth much." So I have to weigh my own desire to ~~be~~ keep it a personal thing ~~you~~ against my pastoral duty to pray collectively. Part of

People, even "authorities" tell us not to pray for ourselves. Part of the reason for that is that we can't foretell the future. We can't see a year or even a day ahead. We may pray for things that

would not be good for us &
pray ~~for~~ Things that would
ultimately harm us. We don't
know what is best for us - God does.
God often has to deny us
things that would not be for
our good - no matter how much
they are wanted.

Socrates taught his disciples to
pray for good Things & not to
specify them - but to leave it
to God to decide what the good
things are.

Dodd explained this passage of
scripture by saying "We cannot
know our own real need. We
cannot ~~c~~ our finite minds
grasp God's infinite plan; in
the last analysis all we can
bring to God are inarticulate
sighs which the Spirit will
translate to God for us."

that makes sense to me.

~~Last year~~ two years ago, I was invited by Rev. Porter, Mark Porter's father, to be part of Mark's funeral. I was the only woman on the podium + other than the chair director, the only white person. I was honored to be asked. The service was held at the 6th St Bapt Ch, where Rev. Porter was the retired pastor.

My part in the service was to read the Epistle. When I saw what I had been given I almost laughed + joy. Many years ago I had preached on ~~these~~ these verses at a Gay Pride interfaith service.

If God is for us - who can be against us?... Who shall unpeark the elect of God? It is God who acquits. Who shall condemn us? It is JC who died + was raised from the dead + who is at the right hand of God, who

intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of God? Shall trial, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it stands written, "For thy sake we are killed all day long; we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter". But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor the present age, nor the age to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus our Lord.

Once you've found the pearl of great price you would sell everything to obtain it.

And it's like a mustard seed. It starts as a small belief & grows into a great tree. It's like the leaven & begins as a small lump & colors your whole life.

You'd work 7 years for it & then 7 more like Jacob working for Rachel.

It's the answer to the person who can't believe in God & the answer to the person who doesn't understand why we need a savior.

What can separate us from the love of God — NOTHING.

It's what you take the chance of life & death on and are glad to do so — joyful to do so. ~~Amen~~ It's what we hand our platform of life on & the best place to begin. Amen.

Challenges o Blessings
Genesis 32:22-31, Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

Billionaire H. L. Hunt once said "I would starve to death on an income of one million dollars a week."

Most of us are closer to broke. Somebody made a list of 10 ways to know you are broke.

1. American Express calls & says "Leave home & me."
2. Your idea of a 7 course meal is taking a deep breath outside a restaurant.
3. You're formulating a plan to rob the food bank.
4. Long distance companies don't call you to switch any more.
5. You rob Peter ... and then rob Paul.
6. You finally clean your house, hoping to find change.
7. You think of a lottery ticket as an investment.

8. You give blood every day, just to get the orange juice.
9. Sally Struthers sends you food.
10. At communion, you go back for seconds.

It's not all that funny to be broke, most of us have been there. But, really, we live in an incredibly rich country - the difficulty generally is that someone is greedy and the rest of us wind up paying for it. Heaven knows how many people's retirement has been affected by the current crimes of huge companies who executives are buying 10 million dollar mansions while their employees lose their life savings.

Some people are a blessing and some are a curse.

But that's really not what I'm going to preach about

but a way into it.

We've been talking a lot recently about Jacob. Can you imagine literally wrestling w God? The Bible says Jacob did. But how about our daily wrestling w God? Theologians call it "theodicy." If God is good, why does bad happen? If God is good, why does the lava always flow down the side of the mountain where the poor people live? Why is there cancer, or AIDS, or any other terminal illness? Why do babies die? Why did - why - why - why? And we struggle w God in all this. Jacob's struggle is our struggle. Jacob was a conniver. Connived his bro. Esau out of his inheritance, connived his uncle out of the best animals, and finally connived God out of a blessing by struggling w him all night.

"I will not let you go until you bless me" he says to God. God will not stay until dawn, the Jews believed, because one would die if they saw God face to face. God was trying to protect Jacob, and all Jacob wanted was more. It sounds terribly current, doesn't it. It also sounds terribly human. We all want more — more money, more security, more, more, more.

Look at the other scripture though. Jesus is grieving. He probably had the same questions we do. John was young — his age. Why did God let Herod kill John? John never hurt anyone why should John die? John was trying to get the king to do the right thing & not give in to the enticements of his wife — daughter — but John had to die. John said he had to decrease so X could increase.

So Jesus wants to hide out for a while. The trouble is he is so popular that there is no where to hide. He heads for the other side of the Sea of Galilee ~~Jordan~~ for some rest — but people follow him — go around the top of the sea & arrive where the boat is going to land. And when he get there a crowd is waiting for them. He spends the day preaching & healing and then it's suppertime. The disciples come to him & ask him to send them away, so they can go find food. Listen to what he says: "You feed them." How can we feed them — we have nothing. Nothing but 5 loaves & 2 fish. (Notice here there's no little boy bringing his lunch.) We can't feed ourselves hardly, how are we going to feed 5,000 men, many more women & children — maybe 10,000 or more people ~ 5 loaves & 2 fish.

What's a miracle? We all pray for one. I didn't study well for this exam - let me pass. I am terminally ill, let me live.

Personal note: When I was really terribly ill, but had had my life saved by the man whose picture is on the front page of Today's paper, I got a note from an unhappy church member - not of Bethel, thank God, saying Why does ~~God~~ answer some people's prayers, but not mine? I don't remember ever praying for God to save my life. I was too ill to know how ill I was! Why does God answer some people's prayers & not others. I have no good answer to that. I know that it is not a matter of faith. I have no more faith than some of you. Some of you probably have more real faith than I do. Telling someone they don't have enough faith

to be healed is like blaming the victims. "Oh, if you only had more faith" listen, babe, this is all the faith I've got & it better be enough.

Jesus did <u>not</u> ask. Do you believe I can feed 10,000 people? <u>No</u> the only thing I see him saying is <u>You feed them.</u>

What's a miracle? Jesus never said he could do miracles. John's gospel has him saying that he does signs & wonders. And he does not really approve of the people who follow him because he does signs & wonders. He approves of the people who love him & follow him out of belief in him.

A miracle is a natural occurrence happening in an unnatural time or place. Okay. So what happens. 10,000 people sit down to eat & only 5 rolls &

2 sardine feed the bunch. Get a little more real. No Jew of that time moved set off on a journey & a small basket loading enough food for the journey. Dried fish & pita bread — pretty much so. Suppose they began sharing what they had with each other. It's a little like a potluck. We each bring enough of one dish to feed the group & we go home & enough to feed an army. We don't think about there not being enough. I've been to potlucks that were heavy on deserts or heavy on veggies — but I've never gone home hungry, and I've picked up some interesting recipes. We're going to have one today. It's not a miracle that we have food. It's a miracle if any one goes away not having gained weight.

Okay, so 12 untrusting disciples fed 10,000 people. No, 10,000 people fed each other & that's the real miracle.

Some people believe the sharing was the beginning of the sacrament of communion. Everybody got just a taste & everybody was content. I don't know if I believe that, although I do believe Jesus could have done it that way. But I think human beings would have gone off grumbling.

Today, Bethel is a year old. Some people have gone off grumbling. It was not what they expected. Maybe they weren't fed enough. Some people have gone off angry because they didn't get the attention they thought they should have had. Some people came once & we were too small or not "churchy" enough. Some

many more - came & stayed. this was what they were looking for. How about you? Are you here for a blessing & will you hold on & struggle for it? Will you hang on until God blesses you? Or do you expect to be fed & no work on your part & go away disgruntled when you don't get what you expected. Did you come to help feed? or did you come to be fed through sharing & others.

It's all in the eye of the beholder. Some people, like the story a few weeks ago of the seed that fell on hard ground - won't come back. Some like the seed on shallow ground - will come & stay awhile but will burn out early. Some, however, will come & flourish.

All we can do is be like the 12. We can encourage people

to share their abilities + feed those who came. What happens is up to God. Some people will struggle with their faith and struggle ~ God until they are blessed. How about you? Bethel is a rich place. It's rich in willing people, it's rich in faith. We are a rich people - not necessarily in money - but in our willingness to struggle for the things we need - including God's blessing. More importantly - we serve a rich God who will meet our needs + who is willing to bless us, all Jesus needs is someone to work ~. Will you be that someone. If so, God will bless you.

Amen.

8/18/02

Getting God's Attention

Genesis 45: 1-15 Romans 11: 1-2, 29-32
Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

A man was going to bed, when his wife told him he'd left the light on in the shed. She could see it from the bedroom window. But he said that he hadn't been in the shed ~~that~~ that day. He looked out and there were people in the shed stealing things.

He called the police, but they told him there was no one in the area so no one was available to catch the thieves. He said "OK" hung up, counted to 30 and called the police again.

"Hello. I just called you a few seconds ago because there were people in my shed. Look, you don't have to worry about them now. I've just shot them all."

Within 5 minutes there were a half dozen police cars in the area an armed response (SWAT) team. They caught the burglers red handed.

50/81/2

One of the policemen said to the man, "I thought you said you'd shot them!"

The man replied, "I thought you'd said there was no one available!"

Do you ever think God is not listening?

The O.T. story is the end of a long story about Joseph – who you remember had the striped coat* (very unusual in those days) and jealous brothers sold him into slavery & who is now the chief minister of Egypt. By relying on God's help, Joseph has now risen to a position of great power. When his brothers come to Egypt to request food, they do not recognize him. He knew them immediately & remembered his dream that they would bow before him. He set out to bring the family back together – but

* a coat = sleeves – e.g. a silly dybernut in those days!

Sermon on why Joseph wasn't recognized?
He was shaved! Body+head, face, the works!

in a very roundabout way.

On their first visit, he accused them of being Spies - insisted their youngest brother (the only other son of Rachel) be brought to him before he would give them food.

On the second visit he planted a silver cup - his divination Chalice - in their bags + accused them of theft.

However, each time his emotions overcame him.

On the first trip, he not only had their sacks filled w grain - he put their money back in the sacks.

On the second trip - he could no longer keep up his pretense of anger about the cup. He had to know how his father + brother were. It was love for them that motivated him to reveal who he was.

He had to forgive them, so

matter how badly they hurt him.

It's a little like adopted children having to find out who their birth parents are. there has to be closure - maybe forgiveness - before you can get on w your life.

I know that because I am a child of a very broken family - and have searched since I was a child for my birth mother. She never came forward to be found and I still have the need to forgive her for abandonment.

Did you ever feel that God had abandoned you. I think half the Psalms are the lament of a man who thought God had abandoned him. Half of the O.T. is the story of the Hebrew people's lament that

God had abandoned them and allowed them to be carried off into captivity - And then there's the story of Joseph.

Remember that Genesis is one of the newer parts of the Bible. It wasn't put together until after they came out of captivity. Joseph was sold into captivity became an important man + forgave his captors and showered them ~~=~~ blessings.

It's almost like one of Jesus' parables. It's almost like one of the disciples asking "what is God like?" and Jesus beginning a story with "Do you remember our ancestor Joseph?

What is God like? ~~What~~ a better question is "What is your God like?"

Many of us are still harboring the scare tales of our childhood, "God is watching you!" Actually, "God is watching over you."

Joseph wasn't still angry ~ his brothers. He had had too many Good years in Egypt. ~~to~~ He had realized that God had taken intended evil + turned it into good. Because he knew that God was good, he could, in turn, shower good — rather than retribution on his brothers.

I can remember a time in my own life when my credo was "retribution is swift + sure." It seemed like I could get away ~ nothing. Everything came ~ it's own punishment. Have you ever felt that way. I think we all do at some time in our lives.

And then we learn that God is more likely to react with grace, rather than punishment. Some acts build in their own punishment. It's a little like alcohol. If you drink enough of it you know darn well you're going to have a hangover.

Joseph's ability to forgive his brothers was a result of his understanding of God. He assured his brothers that he had forgiven them + asked them to forgive themselves (a much harder task). He could do this because he saw the greater purpose in the events of his life.

Remember the Bible verse — "All things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose"

okay. That's one story — but what about the other one?

Isn't the O.T. supposed to be about an angry God + the N.T. about a good Jesus? Well, it's not that simple.

Here we have an O.T. story about a good ~~God~~ + a N.T. story about a racist Jesus! C'mon, Jesus couldn't have behaved like that!

It's an uncomfortable story. Were the people of Jesus' time so unsure, so like us, that it was hard for them to accept a Jesus who was unfailingly giving and show us a Jesus who could do a good thing but do it grudgingly. Maybe they were entirely like us. Maybe the story first looked like this to Matthew who was writing to the Jews.

A foreign woman - a Canaanite - comes up to Jesus and asks for help for her daughter.

Some of us have been there. My daughter needs help, my son needs help — Someone in my family is ill. I am ill. Help me.

And we want to hear that Jesus is always ready to help. But in this case he is silent. Says nothing. Been there? Are there times when God is silent?

Jesus, the incarnate Word, the Word made flesh, does not speak. And the disciples are fed up ⊂ her. Do something for her + send her away - She's getting on our nerves.

And Jesus turns + says. "You don't belong. You're not my job. I've come to serve others not you."

How many of us have been told that? But just before Matthew tells this story – he tells us something important= the religion of the day was a false religion. He says, "From the heart comes pernicious thoughts, acts of murder, theft, false witness, slander. It is these things which defile you. To eat with unwashed hands does not defile you."

He says what we have learned the hard way. Religion can be exclusive. It can leave people out. It can be a test of who can keep the rules better. Who can grow their hair long enough, whose sleeves & skirt are the right length, who smokes or doesn't smoke? who drinks or doesn't drink? who's sleeping ~ whom?

That's not religion. Jesus

knew that. And when he says "look woman, I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel" ~~she counters c~~ "that may be true, ~~but~~ it is not fair to take the children's bread + throw it to the dogs." She counters c "That may be true, but even the dogs get to eat what falls off the table." And Jesus recognizes her faith. "Great is your faith. let it be done as you have asked."

We're a little like that, I think. Too many people tell us Jesus didn't come for the likes of us. We need to clean up our act before we can receive Jesus. But the Bible is full of stories that tell us just the opposite. The Canaanite woman wasn't good enough. She was representative of everything the Jews were against, but once again — good humor got the best of ill feelings —

She may have been "a dog" but she knew she was entitled and she claimed it. "Even the dogs get to eat what falls from the table."

Two stories – a good God from the O.T. a grudging Jesus from the N.T.

Maybe not – Maybe it just means that sometimes when we're not sure where God is in something, God is still there and we will be heard. It's just not easy. It never is. Sometimes you just have to know how it is to communicate w/ God and sometimes it means keeping your sense of humor & telling God you shot the whole bunch & maybe like the cops, God will come running.

Even God has a sense of humor.

Amen

8/25/02

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10, Romans 12:1-5, Matthew 16:13-20

A nurse, who had been dealing w/ sick people all week, felt the need for spiritual uplift + attended her church hoping to hear something helpful. Her minister, instead, had a sermon on the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, which was just what she didn't need.

She drove out into the country to visit her parents. They invited her to go to church w/ them – there was a special service + a special speaker. She went and it turned out to be her pastor, who was preaching on – the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. He was getting a lot of mileage out of that sermon.

As she returned home,

steel spiritually unfulfilled, she remembered that there was a city-wide service that evening. They were to have guest preachers & a combined choir. She decided she would attend. Perhaps there she would get a little inspiration. It was to be. She looked at her program, her preacher was one of the guests, & of course, he preached on the healing of Peter's mother in law.

By now it was the next morning & she got on the bus to head for the hospital. Her pastor gets on the bus and sits next to her. As they are visiting & talking, an ambulance goes screaming by to the hospital. The pastor looks out the window and says, "I wonder who is in that ambulance?" The nurse says, "I'm not sure

but I think it's Peter's mother-in-law. She was sick all day yesterday!"

Simon Peter, Jesus, Moses & Paul. It's an interesting cast of characters for a sermon.

The Jews believed that before Messiah could come there would be forerunners: A leader like Moses, a prophet like Jeremiah and a wonder worker like Elijah. If you remember the Seder, you will remember that the door was opened and a vacant seat — just in case Elijah showed up. The Messiah could come at any time.

In Mark, it would be very hard to identify if Jesus was the Messiah — Luke is a little better on

the subject but it is not too important because he is writing for a Roman/gentile audience. But not Matthew, Matthew is writing to Jewish Christians & they need to know the Messiah has come.

"Who do they say I am?" Well may be ~~Isaiah~~, Jeremiah, Elijah, John the Baptist come back to life.

"Who do you say I am?" No one gets away without asking that question. Who is Jesus?

Remember me saying I don't believe any of us worshipped exactly the same God. Some of us have been brought up with the traditional view of God as an old white man dressed all in white sitting on a throne. Do black people have a white God? I guess I

have to be striped

don't think so. It's a little like the Christmas hymn in which children of many races all see Jesus as looking like them. Honey, in my family, he'd ~~look like a checkerboard~~. We have chinese, Hispanic + blue eyed blondes. (and now black)

What was Jochabed's God like? He had to be protecting first of all. She was entrusting her 3 month old baby to the Nile. The Nile was a God to the Egyptians. All they had depended on the river. Do you know that the reason they could build like they did was because the serf farmers (a little like slaves but they belonged to the land they worked) could only farm when the river rose and overflowed. The rest of the year they would be unemployed. So the government put them to

work building temples & pyramids. the ordinary laborers were just given their food as payment.

Jochebed turned her infant son over to her God. The Egyptian princess fetched him out of ~~one~~ ANOTHER God, the Nile.

Did you ever notice that when you were a kid you were told the story of Moses, but no one ever told you about the midwives. Who do you think their ~~God~~ was? Protective! If we do this, we're going to be in some kind of trouble. God better get us out of this. And as they saved the children God provided for them.

Jochabed's God, the midwives God — Simon Peter's Jesus, the Messiah. The Son of Man, the Annointed one.

an old God, a protesting God (certainly not the old man on a throne but one who could wade in the water). The flaming white Son of God of Daniel - the humble Son of Man of Jesus, the warrior Messiah who would free the people. All one God. But seen very differently.

Did you ever think about where they were when Jesus asked the question. It's interesting.

They went to Cesarea Philippi which was gentile territory. Jesus had fed thousands of people & the authorities already had a contract on his life. He knew they would kill him, but there was still much he had not told the disciples. They had much to learn. It's what disciples mean — they were

still students. So he took them on a field trip.

Before it was Cesarea Philippi it was Paneas, dedicated to the Great God Pan. They believed he was born there. The God of music. There was a shrine to him. It was also earlier a great center of Ba'al worship - the great Canaanite God. It was where a great rock cave was, so deep that no one had ever learned how deep it was, & there the Jordan began from a spring deep in the earth. Finally it was dedicated to the Roman emperor - God.

Many Gods in one place. And there Jesus asks. "Who do you think I am?" "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Not one of the dead Gods that Cesarea Philippi honored - but the

living God. And Jesus said "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. You are now Peter and on this rock I will build my church."

Well, I don't think Jesus said all of that - especially not about the church. There was no church & I don't think Jesus saw himself as starting a new church. I think he must have thought more in the line of "that's the rock on which we build our faith."

Funny thought. Simon Bar-Jonah means son of John & Peter means rock - not a small rock but a large hunk of bedrock. ~~It's~~ His name today would mean Rocky Johnson.

Jesus was pointing out that the bedrock of our faith was who we know Jesus to be.

It's the same thing as our vision of God. Who is God to us? Who is Jesus to us?

It's like I said a few weeks ago, when women in Boston chided me for being a Xtian and a feminist the only thing that came to my mind was "Where would I go, you have the words of life."

For me, Christ is what gives me life. Christ is who taught me I am under grace; that wherever I've been, whatever I've done I have God's forgiveness through the death of X on Calvary & the resurrection assures me that I too have resurrection here & now.

Maybe it's all so simple — But that colors my life. Or colored Paul's. Paul is in prison & desperate and

in the face of possible death he cries out "For me, living is X + dying is gain." to die means he would be ≅ the X whom he loves.

But more importantly Paul asks us to show our God in who we are. He asks us to let Jesus + God transform our lives. Take your ordinary life and let it show the God in you, the X in you.

He says something else important. Don't let your love of God ~~make~~ you proud + haughty but let it send you on a search for wisdom. Let is put you to work exhorting others, teaching, preaching, practical service, sharing, + leadership. And above all showing mercy.

Paul's God/Christ put him to work. What's your God like and what does God ask of you. Today, we

start a new year & new officers. Their God has led them to leadership. Where does your God lead you.

Would the Officers come forward & let us pray.

8/1/02

The Bush That Didn't Burn
Exodus 3:15, Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

The baseball strike reminds me of a baseball story. Andre Dawson, a Chicago Cubs outfielder, disputed a call made by umpire Joe West. Now Bobby Cox would have been thrown out of the game + fined a zillion dollars for the way he disputes umpires, but Andre Dawson drew a fine of $1000. On the memo line of the check, he wrote "donation for the blind."

Do you ever get mad — now I'm not talking small arguments, but I'm talking real down'y brooks. When Shirley + I got together a friend said we wouldn't last 2 years, we'd kill each other. I have to admit I've never thought of divorce - Murder maybe - but not divorce.

Paul was an enormously practical man. Even tho' he was certainly the theologian who defined what Christianity was all about in his letters — every letter ended w. the practical advice — scholars call it Paul's paranesis which teaches people to be the church of God - the dominion of God on earth.

Church fights are enormously mean + bitter. I was church clerk in a Baptist church, where one woman was so put out w her pastor for coming searching for her in a bar, that she accused him of inappropriate fondling. He sued her + the testimony at the church trial proved it. I was then a different person + when he lost his church got over it — and I knew the records would

follow him that I refused to transcribe my notes & just sat on them. I hope he got another church job. He was a good & loving pastor.

There's a church fight going on here where a Pentecostal denomination is having a fight over its leader & is ~~looking~~ changing the locks on churches, to prevent church members from stealing the pews, the altar & the church communion ware.

Church fights are mean. And Paul wrote ~~all~~ parts of every letter teaching people how to be the church & fighting.

God got angry. Today's story is one of those familiar stories we've all heard since Sunday

School. But think for a moment about <u>why</u> God decided to show Godself in a burning bush. God, says the Bible, was angry over the treatment of the Jews in slavery & decided to do something about it.

I keep saying that we all worship a different God. What's more important - Think about it. To believe in God or what you believe about God? Very few people in America don't believe in God. A few die-hard atheists, like the fellow in California who disagrees with "under God" in the pledge - Gallegrower - and by the way, I think he's right, it wasn't there originally & the fundamentalists had it put in under the Republican administration - now he's fighting to get chaplains

RDA 64-N

out of the Senate + House of Representatives. He does not believe in God. But it worries me what he believes about God.

Everybody has a slightly different idea of God. Most of us learned about God from stories like Moses in the bull rushes (last week) or Moses + the burning bush.

We never seem to have gotten all the story when we were kids.

God was angry ⊂ the Egyptians and set a bush on fire to arouse Moses' curiosity. Can you imagine him walking up the hill + thinking "what's ⊂ that bush? It's on fire, but it's not doing anything to the bush. And James Earl Jones voice comes out of the bush. Now that's a God voice!

"Take your sandals off, for the place you are standing is holy ground." Can God speak to you on a mountain? Can God speak to you at Bethel? Or does God require Notre Dame cathedral to really speak to us? Anywhere - anywhere we need to be spoken to. God reminds us over + over that we don't need to be speaking to God for God to speak to us.

"Okay - you're talking to me and you want me to take on Pharoah + free the Hebrew children." If I'm supposed to do this, who do I say sent me?"

Y H W H. We've gotten it wrong ever since. In the days when scripture was a scroll, the Bible portion was in the center + all around the edges were commentaries. God's name was too holy to pronounce or even spell out. So they

abbreviate it. Jews still do. They leave out the O in God + put a blank to remind them of their ancestors belief. On the margin was the word Adonai - Lord. God's name was too holy, so you said "the Lord" instead. Someone who did not know took the vowels in Adonai + added them to JWHW + gave us Jehovah - which was never God's name. It means I am who I am - or I am who I am becoming. God always in growth.

God who is always changing - and we teach people God is unchangeable. God who is passionately angry @ evil injustice and we say God is impassable - no Thank emotion. God who is holy + other than what we are and we talk about "the man upstairs." God is wholly other than what we are.

Jesus got angry. He and the disciples are talking and

he tries to tell them that he is going to have to die. Peter, poor ~~me~~ unxunderstanding Peter puts an arm around him protectively and says "This will never happen to you." Jesus realizes that Peter is completely incomprehending — but also Peter is dangerous. The book & movie "The Last Temptation of Christ" (which, by the way, was the first Communist flick I ever witnessed.) was about a choice Jesus had to make. The temptation was to give up being the Messiah, be just an ordinary human being, & marry Mary Magdalene & have children — or die and be the savior of the world. Those really were the choices Peter held out for him in this passage. Do what Peter wants & live or do what God wants & die. And out of that crushing dilemma, Jesus calls Peter "Satan" because

Peter is giving him the same kind of choice Satan gave him. "Take the way of power. "Give them bread, give them material things; and they will follow." "Give them sensations, give them wonders, & they will follow." "Compromise w the world, compromise w me, reduce your standards & they will follow." All this must have gone through Jesus' head and he realized how Peter was tempting him to give up exactly what he had come to do. And Peter indeed was doing what Satan did.

Praus - the greek word - always angry over the right things, never angry over the wrong things. Anger is like every other emotion. Used correctly, it is the power to change things that need to be changed. Used wrongly, it has the power to destroy.

Paul knew that — he had been a very angry man — look at the stoning of Stephen -

Do not repay evil ⁊ evil. Be careful to do right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace ⁊ everyone. Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written "It is mine to avenge, I will repay." On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for in so doing you heap coals (of shame) upon his head.

Don't hang on to your anger. Don't gunny sack it + store it up — it get dangerous. Find a way to channel your anger in positive ways, + if there is nothing more you can do, turn your anger over to God. Let God change it into something better.

David, in the Psalms, pours his anger out to God and God changes his heart.

God was angry - but God didn't destroy the bush, he used it to draw Moses attention so that Moses could change the situation God was angry about.

Jesus was angry. He knew that if he was to be the Messiah he would have to teach Peter to follow him, not follow Peter.

Paul had been angry & had killed a good man. Someone once said, "Paul was who he was because of the prayers of Stephen".

All of us get angry, but Paul can teach us how to live at peace & one another.

God can take our anger & turn it into action to change the things we are angry about.

I thank God that Bethel is the kind of church where our biggest church fight so far has been over who gets to make the paraments — who gets to serve God first. It's not a really bad thing to fight about.

Amen!

First, You Have to Love Yourself

Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

In a recent TV interview, First Lady Laura Bush repeated that early in her marriage her mother-in-law, Barbara Bush, cautioned her not to criticize George W's speeches. One day, Laura found out why.

As Laura + George W returned from a speech he'd given in Lubbock, Tx, George was pulling into the garage. The future president turned to Laura and asked how she thought the speech had gone. "Quite honestly," she said, George, I don't think it was very good."

Laura Bush reports than George promptly drove through the garage wall!

In a relationships there are just some questions you don't ask. I don't ask Shirley "Was my

sermon any good?" I don't ask because she'd tell me!

It's like you don't ask "what's for dinner?" You ask, "Can I help c dinner?" or even better "where would you like to go for dinner?"

Living c someone is not easy. The rules in Exodus and Leviticus (and I know what treacherous ground that is) are there to help people live in a small community.

Let's go back a minute to the O.T. Moses is trying, on God's say-so, to get the people out of Egypt. Pharoah is an unloving man — even if he's played by Yul Brynner. He does not love the Israelites, but apparently he doesn't love his own people, if he is still

an oppressor even after hard things happen to him. So Moses, with God's help, has to teach him who is truly in power. Don't mess w/ God, God is always going to win.

A group of teens were talking about today's lesson + pointing out that they were being taught that God was good, but destroying all the crops w/ locusts was not the act of a good God. Pharoah must have been really angry enraged at the Israelite God. But God was dealing w/ someone (Pharoah) who believed he was in control, & who would not believe otherwise until he was shown. Some people are like that, and God may teach things the hard way. Someone called it "Tough love," but we don't always understand what God is doing when we are in the middle of a crisis.

Somebody once said, "When you're up to your thigh in alligators, it's hard to remember that you came to drain the swamp."

Anger is a peculiar emotion. It often makes us do things we can't even imagine ourselves doing. How many of us have said to ourselves or someone else, "but that's not like me!"

God was in the middle of a down & dirty fight, and God had to get Pharaoh's attention.

The other thing we have to remember is that the Bible is Israel's story of how it happened. ~~They~~ The Egyptians might tell it differently.

Locusts fly in swarms, & a favorite breeding ground was the Arabian desert. There was no vegetation there & the

swarm must have been ravenous when it got to Egypt. Remember what I said about miracles: they are a natural occurrance in an unnatural time & place. Who knows what wind caused them to fly over Egypt at exactly that moment.

Once they were out of Egypt they were ~~to~~ small tent communities. How do you live in a small community? That's what the 10 commandments are all about. How do we live so that we all get along. It's what By-Laws & Standard Operating Procedures are all about. It allows us to work within a framework so we don't tread on other people. Remember the saying, "~~My~~ Your freedom ends where ~~your~~ my nose begins." And I have plenty of nose. I have a big idea of freedom.

Paul is talking to a small community But he has a peculiar belief: He believes that Jesus will return immediately. He believes that the second coming will happen in his lifetime.

Do you know that the people of Israel today leave the temple wall unfinished because their belief is that the messiah will come before the temple is finished.

Paul led his community to believe they were living in the end time. Jesus was coming back in 30 years. He was coming back in Paul's lifetime. How do you live when you truly believe X is coming tomorrow?

And so he teaches his community how to live.

Let's get real for a moment.
He's living in Nero's time.
Herod beheaded John the
Baptist – the current Herod
is a friend of Nero's. ~~things are~~
~~hardly going~~ The Palace is
certainly not a monastery!
(These days neither is a monastery!)

All around him Paul sees idol
worship. Diana the huntress,
Ceres + Demeter, the cereal gods,
Dionysius, the god of the vineyard.
Dying & rising Gods each of them.
Worship, especially for the
Dionysian cult – was riotous.
Paul tells them not to be involved
in orgies, drunkenness, sexual
immorality, debauchery. He was
not living in Victorian England
or Republican America. He was
living in 1st Century Roman times.
He's talking to the little – house-
group at Rome + he's saying –
don't get caught up in what's
going on all around you.

It's the same thing as the O.T. talking to their people about going off to the temple prostitutes.

How does a small group live. certainly dissention + jealousy would destroy it. So, my dears, will adultery. Can you imagine what would happen if someone in a group this size decided to step outside a relationship with someone from another couple. At least two people would no longer come to church + more probably four. It would decimate the group. The OT writers knew that, Paul knew that and in our hearts we know it, too.

As for the Gospel — Jesus never said what Matthew has him saying. Matthew *is* a manual of discipline for the early church. That's what it was written for and why it was written.

there was no church in Jesus' time but by the time Matthew was written (and it was written after Paul was long dead) about 90 AD. 65 AD they had been driven out of the Synogues and met in homes. They were still small groups, but as the movement spread the groups broke off and started new groups — none of them more than a few hundred people & they started what looked like synogogues of their own. How do you deal w arguments in a small group. And Matthew suggests a means —

First, you go alone. If it doesn't work take an impartial witness, third, take it to the church. That's still good advice — Take your problem to the person who is causing the problem. Second, take one or two witnesses w you. this time take people who can verify

what both sides said. Then take it to the whole church & have the members help you decide...

By then, if the offender is human, s/he has probably pulled out of the group & you treat him, Matthew says, as a gentile or a ~~heathen~~ tax collector.

Now, I know Jesus never said that because I know how Jesus treated gentiles & tax collectors. At least one of his followers, Levi/Matthew was a tax collector - so I don't even think Matthew said that. I think the early Church editors added that part.

Anger is a real difficult thing to deal w. But in a small community it is more dangerous. The Bible is very practical. Morality is more than keeping

rules. It is living so that people see our love for each other. We talk about ourselves as "the small church & the big heart." We really need to see ourselves as loving each neighbor as we do ourselves. Paul says "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

Let me end & a story, maybe particularly fitting so close to Sept 11.

Some years ago, the USS Pueblo, a Navy ship was hijacked by N. Korea. 82 people were taken into brutal captivity. In one instance, 13 were required to sit in a rigid manner around a table for hours. After several hours, guards came in an brutally beat the man in the first chair & the butt of their rifles. It happened on

the second & third day. Knowing that no one could survive such a series of beatings, another young sailor took his place in that chair. The guard automatically beat the man in the first chair. For weeks, a new man stepped forward each day to sit in that horrible chair, knowing exactly what would happen. Finally, the guards gave up. They were unable to overcome sacrificial love.

Certainly as Christians we want to be decent, ethical people. We need to remember that we are a small community & love our neighbors as we would want to be loved. Mostly like Micah says, we want to do justice, love mercy, & walk humbly w/ our God. The rest will fall into place.

Amen.

Work Paid in the same coin
Exodus 16:2-5, Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

Rush's Dear Friend I know Libertee listens to talk radio. I don't want to get that angry that early in the morning. The callers are incredibly stupid (most of them - except Libertee) and incredibly hostile. Richard Barbam & I were on the program one morning for a chat on "homosexuality & the Bible." Today's scripture reminds me of that kind of caller.

"I wanna complain about this Moses guy. Does he know where we're going? I'm a little tired of wandering around. Plus, I have a family. We haven't eaten anything all day except a couple of mosquitoes I brought from Egypt. Something's gotta be done about him." And the talk show host responds "Listeners, I know you've heard me say this before. I know where we can find food, plenty of food. Egypt:

there is a mentality that always wants to go back to Egypt. I certainly have been there. I think it's called a revolving door on your closet!

Relationships are too painful - back to Egypt. My parents don't understand. Back to Egypt. I'm having trouble on my job - Back to Egypt.

The trouble was, they were slaves in Egypt. And I think I discovered a meaning for me in the old spiritual "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave + go home to my Lord and be free.

I think as I wrote this sermon, I began to understand Paul's passage + how it related to the O.T. Story. Paul was a Christian before there was a word for Christians. He just knew that he had to follow Christ, and he also knew that there were obstacles. For heaven's sake he was in prison for being a Christian.

He could have gone back to Egypt. Being a Jew wasn't heaven in those days, but it certainly was better than the things Hero dreamed up for Xtians. But – he was a Jew who knew their history. He heard it every Passover. The hard tasks & the worse task masters, the long trek through the wilderness, the hunger and thirst — strangely, his Egypt was looking ahead. He could go home to heaven. And he ~~said~~ says, "For living is Christ to me & dying is gain." Living he has to pay the last cent for being a Christian — dying – he goes home to be ~~c~~ Christ and finds eternal bliss. Why not go? Now, I understand suicidal thoughts. I think we all do & most of us have been there once or twice. I know I have. I think it is why we all respond so ~~bad~~ strongly when there's a Kat or Greg or

Billy Lacy

we all understand their pain, most of us have been in that pain. Being true to who you really are isn't a picnic. It wasn't for Paul. It wasn't for the children of Israel. Sometimes our very being cries out to go back to Egypt & sometimes it screams "Death would be better."

I've been writing my first ever letter. Now, she's a nice woman but our paths have diverged sharply & she's still in the closet and still worried about things that I settled a long time ago. I've had to explain about parades & what they accomplish. "My God, there are a lot of them." "We keep telling you we're 10% of the population." Gay rights, which of them is most important for you. Closets — what was most confining for you — why did you leave Egypt & why

would you never go back.

Paul says something else important: "What I am to choose is not mine to declare."

Now, as I said about Russ & Lee, Russ seems to think homosexuality is a choice. One day, when we're so young we haven't heard the word, we decide to choose to be homosexual (or transgendered, or straight)? Can you imagine one of us going home to our parents while we're in 6th (or maybe 5th) grade & saying "I think I'd like to be a homosexual." Listen, I can't imagine a straight kid going home & saying "Hey Dad, I think I'm going to be a hetero-sexual."

The choice is not mine to declare. Somebody else made that choice for me. Do I believe it's in the genes - oh yes - do I believe it's a natural variant - oh yes.

You cannot go back to Egypt & as Paul found out – you can't choose death. So many people are depending on us. It's what I found out about being the church in the gay community. We are the barrier against people taking their own lives or having revolving doors on their closets. It's not a choice. It's who we are & who we were meant to be. And it takes courage when people are telling you to go back to Egypt, that you'd be better off dead (heard that one?) or that you can choose to be different.

Today's parable is a terribly important one for us.

You know the story: A landowner went out about six in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

Stop right there. He was growing wine grapes, and if

you do not harvest them before the rains came the grapes would spoil - rot on the vine when they got wet. Every laborer was valuable; they were to be paid one denarius for the day (about 4¢) not a fortune even in those days. About 9am the vineyard owner went back to the market place (where day laborers gathered so they could find work) and found some men standing around & he hired them & told them they would be paid the standard wages. He went back at noon, 3 pm and told the workers he found the same thing & finally at 5:pm he went back & got the last of them & put them to work, At 6:00 the work day was over & he called his overseer to pay the men - start w the last - and he paid them a denarius. And the men

who had been hired first began to complain. "Hey we worked in the heat + wind of the day & all we get is a denarius - these guys only worked an hour + they get paid the same thing!" "Friend," says the landowner "I did you no wrong. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take it and go. It is my desire to pay all the same, is it against the law to give away my money if I want to. Should you be angry if I am kind?"

And then Jesus said "The last will be first & the first will be last."

Now, the important thing about entry into the D of G is not how long you've been a Christian, how hard you have worked at it, or if you are gay or straight. That's a hard concept to understand for some people.

D of G - dominion of God.

If you do so-and-so, you get so-and-so. If you do not do so-and-so you do not get so-and-so. Tit-for-Tat. Quid pro quo.

If we ~~are~~ work hard, our parents will be proud of us. If we work hard, are good citizens, people will applaud us. If we are good heterosexuals, God will love us.

NO! God loves you anyway! Listen, Matthew had it right. Salvation is a gift — You don't earn your salvation. You can't earn God's favor — You are already in God's favor. If you are gay, straight, transgendered you don't have to be someone else to win God's love, mercy + grace — YOU ALREADY HAVE IT! There are no first or second class citizens in the D of G. We are all God's children + God loves us all the same.

God does not play favorites because it is not about us. It's about Christ. What out of love Jesus did on the cross is more important than what who I lose. God's love is not based on wealth, gender or sexuality. God's love is based on Christ's blood shed for us. We are not seen for who we are but for who Christ has made us — Christ sees all of us.

God pays us all in one coin — and the one coin is grace. Grace is free — it's a gift — You do not have to earn it.

We do not have to go back to Egypt — we do not have to choose death. We have chosen life & Paul and we know that to live is X.

I hope people see Bethel as that kind of church — a grace filled

church full of grace filled people. Wherever people are, wherever they have been, whoever they are - and especially if they feel there is no other place: There's here + here we tell <u>everyone</u> - God loves you. Christ died for you. And it's all about grace. It's all you get + It's all you need.

Amen -

The Kingdom of God in Luke...

The old Candid Camera TV show had a classic episode in which two phone booths were placed next to each other. One booth was labeled "Men" & the other "Women" As the camera recorded the scene, no one who used the booths violated the signs. Men used only the booth labeled for men, women used only the booth labeled for them. Even when there was a line for the men's booth & the woman's was empty, no man used the women's booth.

I don't think that would happen today. But it's mind boggling that people can be so acquiescent. People have a tendency to obey the rules.

Or do they? Today's stories are very much about obedience & disobedience.

I don't know about you, but

as a little child I was very compliant. Then I hit 5th Grade & I became a holy terror. I was not going to obey the rules. the trouble w being a youngster is that you are so full of contradictions that the rules don't fit you and people keep trying to make you fit where you don't. I was downright disobedient & I wasn't going to be a square peg forced into a round hole.

Most people aren't like that. We tend — unless the rule violates something innate in us — to obey the rules. But I have to remember that I am talking to a group of people who violate one state law every time they engage in sexual activity. There is a law out there & we

break it, sometimes it never even enters our mind that there is a law. We're not flagrantly disobeying it but we're sort of passive about remembering it.

We don't talk much about sin - mostly because most of us have already heard all we need to hear about ourselves as sinful people - but most of our sins are not sins of commission, but sins of omission. We have good intentions but we don't always put our intentions into action.

Moses on the other hand ran into down right disobedience. Last week, his followers were ready to go back to Egypt because there was no food. This week it's because there was no water. They were in the desert - and being in a desert is water

for any length of time can be life-threatening. You can go for quite a long time w/o food – at least most of us can – but even there we need water + the doctors will tell you that 5 days is about all a human being can go w/o water.

they began to murmur against Moses. But worse, they began to blame God. After all God was feeding them quail + manna, couldn't God also provide water. And Moses turned to God and asked what to do w/ this untrusting lot. God is always a good psychologist. "Don't turn back, don't argue w/ them, go in the same direction you were going, so they will know you are on the right path + ~~find~~ take witnesses w/ you + I will show you what to do."

Werner Keller who wrote a book called the Bible as History tells of a sergeant in the Sinai who accedentally brought water from a rock when a spade hit it. Moses apparently had learned this means of finding water when he was exiled by the Midianites & was a shepherd. It's another one of those situations where the ordinary happens in an extra ordinary situation Horeb/Sinai may mean the same thing. Some think Horeb was the mountain range & Sinai a peak, but lately scholars are saying the northern tribes they called the mountain Horeb & the southern Sinai.

I guess at some time in our lives we've all had a dry spell in which we murmured against

God. God does not follow our time table. "I want water + I want it now" "Sorry," says God, "you'll get water when I am ready for you to have water." Some people give up on God - go back to Egypt. Some people willingly perish. Some, like Moses, take their problem to God, who says go in the direction you were going and pick around the bend you will find the solution to your problem. God cannot be manipulated. the N.T. story bears that out. Jews of the day were still following the old sacrificial system, sacrificing animals for their sins + Jesus had come with the message that he would be the sacrifice for our sins. They wouldn't + listen. By what authority do you preach what you do.

Jesus could be a smart alick, at least they must have thought so - he proposed a question for a question - a very rabbinic trick - was John's message from God or a human one. The Pharisees/Saducees were caught. If they say from God, John was a martyr + they should have listened to him instead of allowing him to be killed. If they say it was just a human message, the crowd would turn on them, because they believed John was a prophet. So they caved in "We don't know." Maybe they didn't. Maybe they were more afraid of the crowd. Jesus was often accompanied by a huge crowd of thousands.

So Jesus told a parable. Most parables begin the Kog is like... This one doesn't, but it might just as well have.

A father asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. Israel was always spoken of as a vineyard. So we know already that this is a story about Israel - a father - God maybe - asks his sons to go to work for him. One voices his obedience and then doesn't go. The other says he won't go but does.

The Body is full of both kinds of people. Those who say yes but do not go — and those who say no, but go.

Jesus doesn't spell it out but the very religious people often did not say "yes" to God, but the prostitutes + tax gathers may have said no to their rules but followed him + in following him they followed God.

Lots of times we're like

that. We know what God wants from us, but we just don't get around to doing it — or we fuel rebellions & say "No," & then go ahead and do what God expects.

A writer tells a story about visiting the ice rink at Rockefeller Center. Dozens of people skated around the rink. In the center of the rink was a woman dressed in elegant skating outfit, stretching & posing, stretching and posing. The writer waited for her to finish warming up & begin skating but she never did. On other visits she saw the same woman doing the same thing. She spent a lot of time warming up & in skater's poses, but she never took to the ice. The writer said she was all appearance & no substance."

for many christians, they wear the xtian jewelry of the day, sing the latest Praise choruses, + know all the latest preachers, but really in their hearts it's all show and no substance.

And then I think about us — outwardly not always obeying the rules but inwardly following Christ no matter what obstacles are set in our way; a lot of substance but not much to show that we are xtians.

Someone said recently, if Jesus came back where do you think you'd find him? I wonder if he'd be at the big pep rallies for Jesus or maybe at some of my favorite like Grace or Church of the Reconciler or if we are really true to what we believe here. I would

hope so. Philippians asks us simply & the early church to be able to say "Jesus is Lord": ~~Caesar~~ Caesar was Lord and they had to perform the annual libation/sacrifice & bow to Cesaer - Jews didn't have to. Xtians refused to and had a choice - sacrifice or die, they chose death rather than claim anyone - especially Cesaer to be greater than Christ. Xtians

the Dog 6 is fulled & both kinds of people, Jesus says, but at the same time he asks us to choose.

Final story: Wm. Tarbell used an analogy - light travels at 186,000 miles a second. The starlight shining in your window left the star about the time Shakespeare was writing his plays. The light has been traveling all that time to reach you & provide its light,

It's like the work of the first disciples. It still influences you. Although they've been dead nearly 2000 years the effect of their work travels through history + affects us. It is felt in our lives today".

Well, we're not facing Cesar + being asked to choose. But every day we have opportunities to be obedient to God. We can murmur + rebel as we can say yes + not do it. Or we can say "I don't want to," and do it anyway. Your life doesn't depend on it today - but your soul does. All of ours do.

These days God doesn't demand a lot from us - let's try to be a little more obedient and do what God asks of us. As we really say "Jesus is Lord"?

WTC chaplain of fire dept

Father Michal's prayer

"Lord take me where you want me to go. Let me meet who you want me to meet / Tell me what you want me to say. Keep me out of your way.

Each day X expects us to be able to say "Jesus is Lord" and what do you expect of me today.

No murmuring, no saying yes & not going & hopefully not saying no & going anyway. The Body of Christ is full of unwilling doers — probably the majority of us — but let's try to be more cooperating w God.

Amen.

Father Ingebol's prayer.

"Jesus take the reins upon your head
me to go. For me must into your
power me to must / feel me.
must thou must me to say.
keep me and of thou pray.

Each day I suppose us to be
ask to Jesus "Guide in thou"
and what is your suppose!
If me today.

In morning, he opens the
+ not going + together
not during me + opening
evening. the by I of just
it marching down - gradually
thy request I us - but
only to his word.
Amen.

Today is World Communion Day - when congregations who celebrate communion monthly, some quarterly + some annually will all be taking communion many of them at the same hour as we do — but if you can imagine somewhere in the world every ~~hour of~~ every daylight hour today Christians will be observing communion all around the world. Something that happened nearly 2000 years ago is happening now all over the world. It is awesome.

Also today is the AIDS walk + some of us are already there + some will be attending as soon as they leave here. Once we attended these walks in mourning, now we attend them as a sign of hope.

Giving + Taking the D of G

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Phil 3: 4b-14

Matthew 12: 33-46

As all of you know, I have worked in hospitals most of my life. And hospitals are peculiar places filled w peculiar people. One job I had was w a speech hearing center of a Boston Hospital, so I found this story amusing. An audiologist is the person who tests hearing. Audiologist David Levy recalls the day a frantic patient coming into his clinic because she had lost her hearing aid. She had been eating a bowl of cashews while watching TV. Her tiny ear-in the ear hearing aid was sitting on the coffee table next to the nuts. She got so involved w the TV story that she mistook her hearing aid for one of the nuts + ate it! So much for taking care of herself.

A few weeks ago I talked about rules + law being given so

that people could live in small communities. What do laws given 4000 years ago mean for us today.

The ten commandments are written as a suzerainty treaty between a powerful lord & a captive people. As I have often said to people who've had a hard time in parts of scripture, the D of G is not a democracy. So, God sets out the credentials in the beginning as to why God is the suzerign. God brought them out of Egypt. They were to be the basis for Israel's law. Interestingly, they are based on much old, non-Israelite law. Every religion has an ethical code. This is how our people behave. They were based on the Code of Hammurabi — a leader of much earlier civilization

In Hebrew, they are called simply "10 words" Hebrew says very simply "You will not —" or "you will not mak—" and they were set in the singular — addressed to the one person, which was why they were translated "thou". While they were binding on the whole community, they were addressed to the individual.

Graven images - while there were little female figures - asherah - the consort of Yahweh - male figures were forbedden & the reason for it was that tribes around them were phallus worshippers.
Secondly, people in the ancient world believed if they knew the name of a God they could work magic ē it.
I wish many people would realize that often they think that prayers will be automatically

answered if they are offered in the "name of Jesus". We cannot define God + we cannot conjure in God's name. God/ Christ is not the God of a single political party. I think the current Republicans feel they have a corner on Christianity. The saber rattling of our current President would not be, I do not believe, what Jesus would do. Sept 11 a year ago changed many things - but not my view of Jesus. I do not believe he came as a man of war + I believe he said he did not, but I notice that the Christians on the right have ignored that fact.

Barclay said in relation to this scripture - and he said it nearly 60 years ago "If we study the darkest days of the church's history we find that they were almost always due to well-meaning

people who isolated + stressed some of the attributes of God. They were doubtless true, but in isolation + overstressed they have led to some of the awfullest deeds by a fallen humanity."

And the comment about something affecting the 3rd + 4th generation was not unlikely. Given the early age of marriage a man could easily be surrounded by his sons + daughters, their children + grandchildren. It was not uncommon for 3-4 generations to be living in a single encampment. I have to laugh, because in my Sunday School at New Orleans many friends my age then were having grandchildren when I had Missy. When girls marry at 17 + their daughters marry at 17 and their daughters marry at 17 it is not unlikely by 50-51 to have 3 generations. Shirley's sister Ina, a year or so younger

than I already has a great grandson.

Keeping Sabbat meant that at least one day was kept Holy for God to remember how they had been enslaved & to be able to rejoice & thank God that they were not. By Jesus time the Sabbath was a time of prohibition; there were thousands of things one could not do & Jesus saw that it had become more of a burden than a time of rejoicing — and one more time it was a time of slavery & slaves were not permitted to desist from work. Jesus saw that there could not be two kinds of citizens of the D of G.

Since theirs was a patriarchal society the command to respect their parents was very strong. The patriarchs made the rules & everyone else followed.

"Thou shall not kill" was very

strongly observed in my family. We were & still are committed to non-war solutions to problems. My dad was an ambulance driver at 17 in WWI, my uncle was a chaplains asst in WW II. My brother was the only one to serve as a combatant in WW II + I have been eternally grateful that my sons were either too young or now too old to go to war. I don't know how we are going to learn that war is not an option any more. The world is too small. Planet earth can be encircled too quickly for any people to wage war. There must be other ways + we must find them. Some point out that the commandment used Tratzach which means "You will not do any murder." But we forget all too soon how many civilians get killed in wars. Hundreds of children lost fathers, mothers or both on Sept 11, 2001.

Bless Barclay – he points out that sexual promiscuity was never prohibited by scripture. two things were – one was adultery – because it mixed up the question of blood lines + hurt the community. The other was sex as idolatry. The canaanites had temple prostitutes + the Israelites were forbidden to go to them; so were the early Xtians. I keep reminding people that only Romans could marry Romans + Jews. Jews – everyone else kept concubines. Barclay also points out that in the ancient world there were very few other ways for a young widow to earn a living – which was why Xtianity was so certain to take care of young widows. The Hebrew idea of theft was that it was a sin against God for it accused God of not giving adequately. It is also a

condemnation of the one stolen from because that one has not adequately met the need of our time. We could all look at that one again. The poor in America cannot afford a place to live — even if a two-income family are both working at minimum wage they cannot afford proper housing.. We must do better.

False witness on the other hand could condemn a person to death. And if one did indeed bear false witness they had to pay the penalty that would have been imposed upon the accused. Tough law.

Coveting is selfishness. I want what you have, & it implies that one is not satisfied w what God has provided. Certainly Enron & WorldCom & all the other huge businesses are guilty of

coveting + they have ruined many.

Jesus points out that he could sum the law up succently in "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Love God + love your neighbor.

Jesus again reminds them that he was sent to supplement not supplant the law. God entrusted people c the law, but they killed the prophets who reminded them that they had broken it + now they were going to kill the very Son of God. He points out that they have rejected him but he is going to be far more respected by those to whom the law was not given. He was to be the cure foundation for those people - which includes us.

And finally Paul says, I was given the law. I

am a born Jew, I speak Hebrew, I am a pharisee - but I count it all unimportant garbage - because the important thing is Christ. Once more we can sum up the law in Micah's words, "love God, do ~~mercy~~ justice, walk humbly ~ your God.

We need all to be humbled. I cannot live as ~~B~~ blamelessly as X, but I can try & so can we all.

Amen.

Dear Lord Jesus, I repent
of my sins. I am a sinner -
but I trust in all sufficient
power - I mean, the
important thing is Christ. Even
more, we can pray the two
of Mark's words, "Lord God,
~~Father~~ in writing, words humbly I
pray to."

We need only to be humbled.
I cannot keep that clearly
in X, but I can trust to our
words.

Amen.

Who Gets Invited to the Feast
Exodus 32:1-14, Phil 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

I love this story because its one that could have been told at my house. ~~Little~~ Son Jonathan came home from the playground ~~t~~ a bloody nose, black eye, and torn T-shirt. It was obvious he had been in a bad fight + lost. While his ~~father~~ mother was patching him up, she asked the boy what happened.
"Well, Mom," said Jonathan, "you know Eddie -- the kid who's always giving me a hard time. I challenged him to a duel - and I gave him his choice of weapons."
His mom said "that seems fair."
"I know" Jonathan said "but I never thought he'd choose his big sister!"

Conflict is part of life. People get into arguments. Resentment

builds. Controversy erupts & angry words are spoken. The Poet Carl Sandburg once wrote a one line poem "Be careful how you use proud words." Relationships get broken. People begin fights over both important & unimportant things. Especially in church. It's one of the reasons that there are so many Baptist churches. Group A thinks Scripture B means one thing and Group B thinks it means something else & before you know it you have the 31st, 32nd & 33rd St Bapt churches. A cartoon showed this notice on the Bulletin board "213 days 5 a split."

The Bible is a history of a people's journey ⊂ God. Good, bad & indifferent, they wrote it all down.

Moses had his problems & people of a different mind than his.

He had been up on the mountain "40 days". By now you should all immediately think "long enough." He may have been there a month, it may have been two weeks, but it was long enough for him to receive the law. Some people believe it was a volcanic mountain, accounting for the smoke & fire, which makes sense. But the people believed Moses may have perished and they wanted a god-figure. Moses may have been their god-figure and he was gone - they thought. So Aaron collected their earrings. Men, women & children. Earrings were not a fashion statement - they were a sign of slavery. The law said after 7 years a slave was to be set free.

* Bull in Israel was the throne of God. Shown as 2 Bulls - side by side w/ God standing one foot on each.

If he/she chose not to go, they were to be stood up against the door post & a nail driven through their ear & an earring placed as a sign of their slavery. Anyway, they collected the earrings and made a form of a "calf." Actually, the Hebrew word is bull.* The people of Canaan worshipped bulls & remember, this was a very mixed group coming out of Egypt. They really were just beginning to know Yahweh, and ~~they~~ good the only word they had was Moses' word about this ~~[illegible]~~ God. who was also new to many. So there they were singing & dancing around this bull when Moses came down from the mountain. As a pastor — and I guess Moses was part of their pastor - I can imagine how he felt. He'd been on a 40-day retreat where he actually met God and talked to God & comes down

from the mountain + sees an altar & a bull on it. He got so mad he broke the tablets of stone. By the way a bit of news for Judge Moore & his stone tablets (in English, of course, on the court house steps) the tablets were written on both sides. But that never dawned on him when he had his stone cutter make his tablets.

Take a jump of a millenia or two to Paul's time. Paul is writing to his little church at Philippi in Macedonia. There are important women in this church. Usually, Greek women at that period were more like the arab women of today, veiled + secluded. Macedonian women, on the other hand, were very different. They were artesians + shopkeepers. Some of them, like Lydia, very wealthy by their own hands. And some of them were leading

fights. Euodia (pleasant smell) and Syntyche were important co-workers of Paul's in that area. Remember that churches met in people's homes in those days + these may have been sisters in whose home a church met or rival house church leaders.

Paul exhorted every one he could to bring a peaceful end to the quarrel. This, like Bethel, was a small house church + it was important that everyone be in agreement.

Paul tells them to rejoice - always. ~~Phil~~ To be moderate in all things, not to worry, but to bring their prayers + supplications to God. It is funny, but he lays out the prayer form we follow today. Thanksgivings. supplications + prayers.

He promises that if they do that they will experience the peace of God. To a jewish Christian, to received Shalom peace would be the greatest blessing not just the absence of conflict but every possible Good that God could provide.

We're in the season named by the Methodists as "Dominiontide" or "Kingdomtide," because the scripture is based on how we live as Xtians or as a Christian community. And the readings remind us that we are the DOG on earth. We are all important + we are all equal. The parable reminds us of that.

A King - God - is giving a banquet. The DOG is always a party! And God knows how to throw a good party. In the ancient world + still in parts of the world today, the

best parties are wedding feasts. God throws a wedding feast for his son. People didn't read & write in those days, & so he sent servants to ~~tell~~ write them, when the feast was ready. Then he sent servants a second time to tell them they could come now, for everything was prepared.

It was, of course, an accusation to the religious leaders of that day. Jesus had come & invited them to follow him & they had refused. "One to his estate", refers to the wealthy Sadducees, many of whom had estates by the sea; "one then to his business" refers to the Pharisees, many of whom were the business men of the day. The rest seized the servants & killed them. Remember Matthew was written after the persecution of Nero & during the persecution of

dominion. Finally the invitation was given to the sinners & Gentiles who never expected to be invited to the feast. Matthew was also written after the fall of Jerusalem in 73 AD. If they had followed Jesus & been people of peace & not had an insurrection, Jerusalem may not have fallen.

You see, we are invited to the wedding feast. We're the sinners & Gentiles who didn't have to be born into the DOG to deserve it. We're the outsiders who get to be invited — not because we followed the law, but because God simply & unconditionally loved us. In the DOG, God realizes that the deepest need people have is for unconditional love. We are all loved, not because we earned the right, but because God simply loved us and